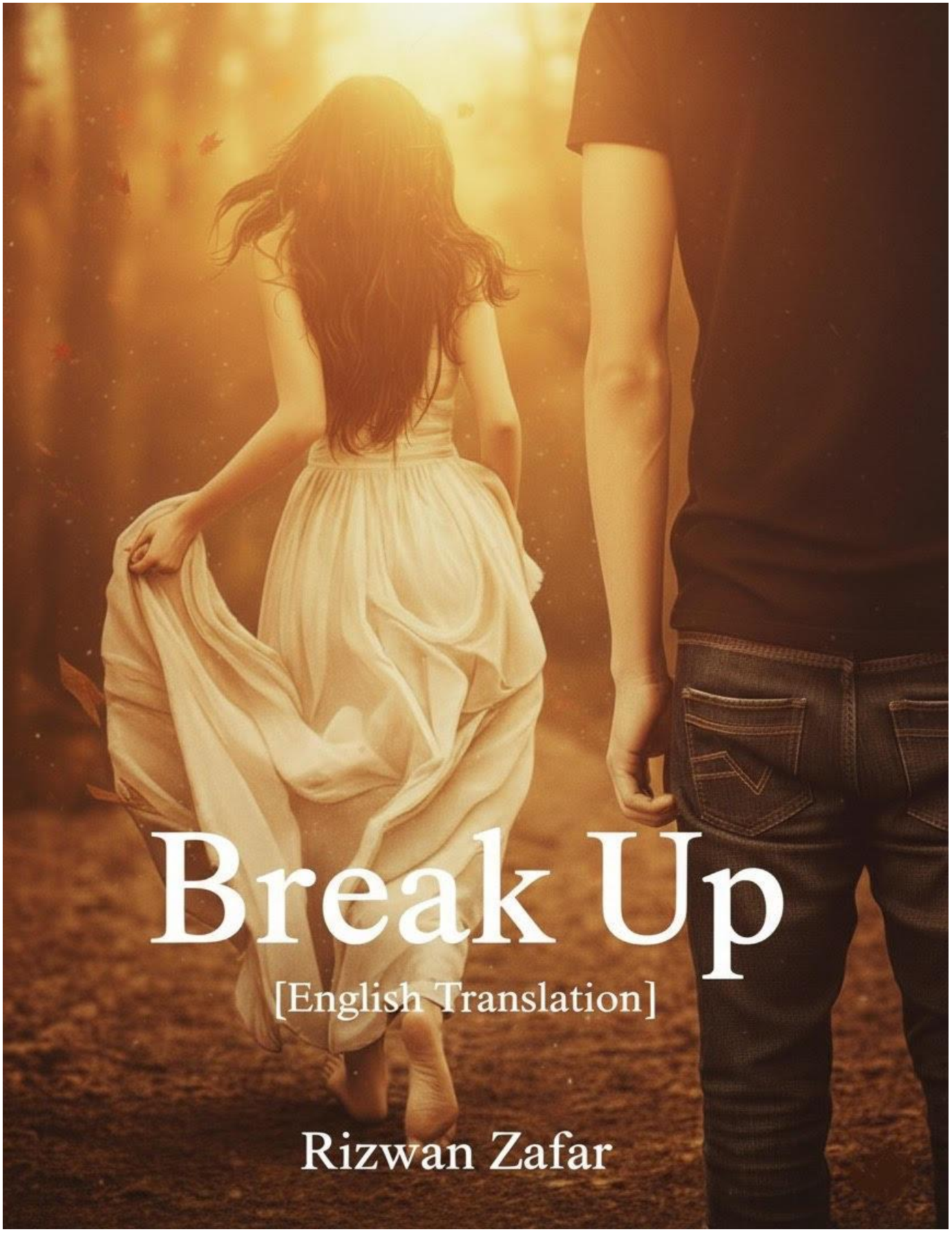
Break Up
[English Translation]
Rizwan Zafar

To my mother — whose prayers are the unseen foundation of this book — I owe everything.

Preface

“Break Up” is not merely a story — it is the reflection of a soul passing through fire and learning that every wound carries within it the whisper of divine wisdom. This novel marks my first written effort, born out of silence, struggle, and surrender — and it is to my mother, the source of every prayer that ever reached the heavens for me, that I dedicate this work. Her faith has been the lamp that kept burning even when all light around me dimmed.

The story of “Break Up” holds within it a small yet profound message — one that the heart understands long before the mind does. We spend our lives fearing loss, clinging desperately to people and relationships as though life itself depends on them. But sometimes, what we call a break-up is not the end — it is the quiet beginning of something purer, wiser, and closer to the truth.

Not every separation is a punishment. Some are gifts in disguise — doors that close to lead us toward our destined path. What feels like heartbreak today may, in time, reveal itself as divine mercy. This realization, however, does not come easily. It arrives only when we stop resisting the will of Allah and learn to see His hand even in our deepest sorrows. For He alone is the supreme Writer — the one who pens every joy and every heartbreak with perfect precision.

“Break Up” is a journey from attachment to awakening — from the illusions of worldly love to the serenity of divine acceptance. It reminds us that sometimes Allah shatters our hearts only to teach us how to love Him more completely.

Rizwan Zafar

Chapter One — The Circumambulation of Desire

Amidst the shimmer of lights and colours, an exquisitely crafted stage stood at the heart of the Royal Opera House Auditorium, commanding every gaze. Surrounded by a kaleidoscope of beauty and brilliance, one could almost believe they had stepped into the very galaxy of show business itself. As the final notes of the stage performance faded, anticipation rose — the announcement for one of the evening's most coveted awards was about to begin. The audience leaned forward, waiting to hear who would be crowned the "Best Face of the Year."

In the first five rows sat the distinguished guests — the luminaries of the entertainment world. Television crews, photographers, and journalists from every major publication had declared this event the grandest of the year, capturing its every moment from all conceivable angles.

"And now the award for the best face of the year in the female category goes to...."

A mellifluous feminine voice echoed through the auditorium — that of a radiant model and host.

"Any guesses?"

This time, it was a striking television actress beside her, teasing the audience with playful anticipation. Instantly, the auditorium erupted in a flurry of excitement and noise. The giant plasma screens flashed close-ups of the women seated among the VIPs — one face after another, each more graceful, more captivating than the last. They smiled — some nervously, some with feigned composure — each waiting for destiny to call her name.

All but one.

Among them was a face that remained calm, expressionless — that of an eighteen-year-old model, ethereal in her simplicity. Her skin was porcelain white, flawless, untouched by the need for heavy makeup. While others had highlighted their eyes with layers of cosmetics, her restrained elegance made her gaze luminous and deep. A trace of dark red lipstick framed her soft lips — alluring, yet unable to ignite warmth in her faint, fleeting smile, a smile that appeared and vanished as if too shy to stay.

She listened intently as the host's voice carried through the air.

"And the award goes to Nazli Shafi."

The name was announced with unbridled enthusiasm, and a wave of applause swept through the hall. The spotlight found her instantly — her image illuminated across every screen.

This time, her smile bloomed with radiance, alive and full of light — a smile felt by everyone present.

Amid the thunder of applause, Nazli rose gracefully. Draped in a Banarsi-silk ensemble — a black churidar *pyjamas* paired with a red-and-black embroidered dupatta — she moved toward the stage with elegance, gathering the flowing fabric of her dress in practiced poise.

She was not merely the Face of the Year — she was the Face of the Decade.

With each step she climbed, the applause grew louder, the cameras flashed faster. The hosts greeted her with eloquent compliments. A senior model stepped forward to present the award, embraced her, admired her beauty, and congratulated her warmly in English.

Nazli received the award with a radiant smile, whispering softly, “Thank you.”

It was the moment she had dreamed of for years. Yet, just as the award touched her hands — the world began to tremble. The hosts before her seemed to waver like reflections in rippling water. The brilliant stage lights blurred, dimming into a haze. The music now felt like from the tape recorder distorted into a trapped, discordant sound. Startled, Nazli looked around. Faces that had been smiling seconds ago were now pale with terror. A deafening explosion shattered the air.

Smoke. Fire. Debris.

Everything tore apart — lights, banners, screams — the grandeur of the night dissolving into chaos. But Nazli did not move. She stood frozen, lifeless, her eyes wide open, watching the horror unfold — a living witness to apocalypse.

The jammed tape recorder played on, its warped tune faltering until it faded into silence. The world seemed to slow — every motion stretched, every sound distant. Nazli tried to scream, but her voice was locked inside her throat. Her feet felt bound to the earth. The scene before her transfixed — rubble, smoke, and shadows swirling in the void.

Then someone tugged her arm sharply.

A faint voice called her name.

“Nazli!”

“Nazli…*parathas*…?!”

The voice came closer — right beside her now.

Parathas? The word made no sense here. What did *parathas* have to do with this destruction? The tug on her arm came harder, forcing her to turn. She squeezed her eyes shut, then slowly opened them — and saw her sister, Sana, standing there with a jug of water.

Nazli tried to speak, but before she could, Sana emptied the cold water over her face.

The chill jolted her awake. Her eyes opened fully.

“Nazli! For God’s sake, there is a limit to everything! I told you last night that today you’re responsible for making breakfast. At least on your day off from college, you could have done this much — but there can’t be a girl more careless than you!” Roshan Ara’s irritated voice rang out, her glare sharp and impatient.

“Best face of the year…”

A mocking voice seemed to echo in Nazli’s mind.

She turned toward the wall, where a framed photo from a cousin’s wedding hung — her own smiling face captured in time.

Between her dreams and her reality, only one thing remained the same — her beauty.

“Ammi, I only get one day off from college,” Nazli said wearily.

“And I don’t get even one day off from household work,” Roshan Ara shot back.

“Nazli, where did you keep Baba’s ironed clothes last night? He was looking for them in the morning,” Sana called mischievously as she left, fully aware it would bring Nazli another scolding.

“She must not have ironed them at all — I know her,” Roshan Ara said sharply, gathering the clothes scattered around.

“I sat down to help Ameen and Sharmeen with their homework,” Nazli muttered tiredly, searching for her hair clip.

“You must have sat for half an hour at most. Anyway, come now and make breakfast.”

Roshan Ara left the room, still muttering under her breath. Sana had already disappeared to escape her mother’s temper.

Nazli stood before the mirror, staring at her reflection with blank eyes. Perhaps being scolded two or three times a day was simply her fate.

She was the third among five siblings — one elder brother, Amir; an elder sister, Sana; and two younger ones, Sharmeen and Ameen. Their father, Javaid Shafi, owned a small furniture shop in Saddar Bazaar, Karachi. A simple, dignified man in his mid-fifties, he was cheerful by nature and regular in his prayers. Amir, now twenty-two, had been determined for months to marry the girl of his choice — a love story that had become his life's greatest achievement. Two years ago, he had joined his father in business, uninterested in studies. While selling furniture, he had also bartered away his heart — to Anita, who in turn had agreed to pay the price by becoming his bride. But to make that happen, Amir first had to win his mother's approval — and that was proving far harder than any sale.

✦✦✦

Roshan Ara sat sewing in her room, a television drama flickering before her. Every few minutes she glanced at the screen, half-attentive to the story. Amir entered, dropped into a chair, and began watching silently.

"What are you doing?" he asked after a while.

"Can't you see what I'm doing?" she replied dryly, biting off the thread.

"Why are you still at home? Shouldn't you be at the shop? Your father left long ago."

"I stayed back to talk to you," Amir said, eyes fixed on the TV.

"Oh! What do you have to talk to me about?" she asked, only half-interested, until he turned off the TV with the remote.

"Ammi, tell me clearly — are you going to let me marry Anita or not?"

Her hands paused. "How are you talking to your mother like that?" she snapped, glaring at him.

"You've forced me to speak like this," Amir said sternly.

"Have some shame! You have two grown-up sisters sitting at home, you do no real work, and all you can think about is marriage."

"The two sisters are your and Baba's responsibility, not mine," Amir shot back. "And as for sitting at the shop — I do that to earn money."

"The girl for whose sake you're arguing with me — I'll never let you marry her. When you marry, it will be to Khalida's daughter, Areeba."

Amir clenched his jaw, exhausted by his mother's "plans."

“Ammi, listen clearly — I will marry only Anita, or else no one.”

“And you listen clearly as well — I will never let you marry the girl of your choice.”

“Then whatever I do now, you alone will be responsible for it.”

He left the room abruptly.

Moments later, Sana entered with a cup of tea.

“What happened?” she asked, seeing her mother’s flushed face.

“Oh, nothing — he’s stuck on the same thing again: marriage. No education, no career, just this madness!” Roshan Ara muttered. She was convinced that Anita had cast a spell on her son.

To Javaid, however, Amir’s happiness mattered most. Their firstborn — his pride. Whenever Roshan Ara raised the issue, Javaid’s answer was the same: calm her fears, defend his son. Nazli, meanwhile, moved quietly through a home that was never short of love but always full of noise. Beauty was her inheritance, but in this household of handsome faces, it held little weight. No one praised her — no one needed to. She had discovered her beauty only through the eyes of the outside world.

✦✦✦✦

Far from the bustle of the city, four heavy bikes thundered along the coastal highway, slicing through the night with a roar that echoed across the vast emptiness. Their headlights streaked through the darkness like shooting stars racing each other across the horizon. Beneath their helmets, the riders’ faces were hidden — their identities masked, their youth blazing through the speed.

Among them, one rider always surged ahead — confident, reckless, unstoppable. Each time he reached the end of the stretch, he slowed, waiting for the others to catch up, his bike humming beneath him like a beast unwilling to rest.

In his pocket, his phone kept vibrating — call after call — but the thrill of the race was far more intoxicating. The world outside this rush of wind and wheels could wait.

When the four finally brought their bikes to a halt, dust swirling around them, the night seemed to exhale. They removed their helmets almost in unison — the first among them, the leader, shaking his hair free with a swift, practiced motion. His damp, dark hair clung briefly to his forehead before he brushed it back with his fingers. Fair-skinned, clean-featured, and strikingly handsome, Zain’s face carried both charm and defiance.

His phone rang again. He glanced at the screen, sighed, and closed his eyes before answering.

“Hi, Mom!”

“Zain! Wherever you are, come home right now — immediately. I don’t want to hear a single word. I told you that Afzal is returning today, and when he arrives, you must be at home.”

Huma’s voice on the other end was low but firm — the controlled tone of a woman masking fear beneath composure.

“I told you already, Mom, that I have some late-night plans with my friends — yet you’re still calling me.”

“I told you to come before Afzal arrived. He’s home now, but you’re not. What am I supposed to tell him?”

“What difference does it make? Just tell him I’ll be home late,” Zain replied, his irritation evident even through the sound of the wind.

“Yes, come home comfortably, because I’ve told Afzal a lie — that you’re asleep in your room.”

Her voice had dropped into a whisper — tense, angry, edged with fear.

“But why did you lie?” Zain asked, stepping away from his friends.

“To save both you and myself, understand? Now come only after Afzal goes to bed.”

She cut the call abruptly.

Zain exhaled sharply. “Okay.”

“What happened, Zain?” one of his friends asked.

“Nothing, man — the same old issue.” He shrugged it off, then called his servant. “Kareem, come to the gate in a little while, and open the kitchen door from the inside.”

With that, Zain pocketed his phone, swung a leg over his bike, and sped into the night.

✦✦✦

Meanwhile, Huma was pacing the dim corridor of the house, her heart pounding. The call had ended, but the unease in her chest hadn’t. The sound of footsteps behind her made her turn abruptly — and there stood Afzal.

For a moment, she froze. His tall figure blocked the light from the living room behind him. His eyes — dark, sharp — were fixed on her with unnerving calm.

“Wh... what happened?” Huma stammered, pretending nonchalance, her trembling hands betraying her.

Afzal didn’t answer immediately. He stood silent, his gaze steady. Then, with deliberate calm, he spoke.

“Nabeel and Aiza have never lied to me — do you know why? Because even *Sumbul* never lied to me.”

The name struck like a blade.

Huma’s lips parted, but no words came. The air around her thickened. He looked at her for a moment longer, then turned and walked away without another word.

The echo of *Sumbul* — his first wife’s name — lingered like a wound reopening. Years had passed, yet the comparison still burned as freshly as ever.

Huma had entered Afzal’s life after Sumbul’s death from cancer — a young widow replaced by a woman chosen for practicality more than affection. Her parents, dazzled by Afzal’s wealth, had accepted the proposal without hesitation. Even the photographs of the wedding showed Nabeel and Aiza — Sumbul’s children — standing dutifully beside their father, symbols of the compromise Huma had chosen to accept. She had imagined that with time, devotion would earn her place. But instead, she had lived in Sumbul’s shadow — hearing her name whispered in every comparison, every judgment, every sigh. When Zain was born three years later, motherhood had given Huma a love she had never known — but it also deepened her fear. Afzal had always warned her about Zain, insisting he would go astray if she kept shielding him. Whenever she defended her son, Afzal would remind her — with quiet cruelty — of Sumbul’s children: disciplined, brilliant, and obedient. Eventually, he stopped comparing them aloud, perhaps accepting what Huma never could — that Zain was nothing like them. By the time Zain entered secondary school, Nabeel was already completing his MBA in America, and Aiza had left for England for her medical residency. Huma spoke of them with pride but also with quiet resentment, knowing Afzal used their success as a mirror to reflect her failure.

“In such lower grades, you make your son study with three tutors — and he still fails!” he would often say.

“But he works so hard,” she would insist helplessly.

“I’ve never once seen him study seriously. He’s in sixth standard now. Remember how responsible Nabeel and Aiza became when they entered secondary school?”

“I admit Zain isn’t as intelligent as his brother and sister,” she would reply softly, careful never to call them step-siblings.

“Everyone has the same mind, Huma — it’s all about focus,” Afzal would answer coldly.

And every time, she would repeat his words to Zain — gently, lovingly, in the hope that he would listen. But Zain never did.

He drifted through school, then through college, always trailing behind his peers. By the time his friends were applying for master’s programs, he was still stuck finishing his A-Levels — three years overdue.

To keep peace at home, Huma began lying. First small lies, then bigger ones. *He’s improving… He’s trying… He just needs time.* Lies told so often they began to sound like prayers.

Now, as Afzal returned from a long business trip abroad, Huma’s heart pounded at the thought of facing his disappointment again.

Half an hour later, the quiet hum of a motorbike broke the stillness of the street. Zain parked at the corner, switched off the engine, and rolled it toward the gate. Kareem was already waiting in the shadows, as instructed. Together they moved silently through the porch. Zain slipped through the kitchen door into the darkened house, every step measured, every sound avoided. Only a few faint lights glowed in the hall. He tiptoed up the stairs and pushed open the door to his room.

The light flicked on.

And he stunned.

Afzal was sitting on the sofa, waiting.

“Hello, Dad… you’re here?” Zain stammered, voice trembling.

“Surprised to see me?” Afzal’s tone was low, cold.

“I didn’t expect you…”

“Nor did I expect you to sneak into your own house like a thief.”

“I thought everyone must be asleep.”

“When you come home at midnight, how can we possibly sleep?” Afzal said, his voice like a blade drawn slowly.

Zain fell silent.

“Zain, do you even realize that for the past three years you’ve been stuck in A-Levels? Your classmates have already graduated, some are doing their master’s — and you’ve learned nothing but how to lie.”

Zain had heard this speech countless times, every word etched into memory.

“Forget others — look at your own siblings. They’ve advanced in their careers, while you’ve mastered deceit.”

“I’m sorry, Dad. It won’t happen again,” Zain murmured, drawing a slow breath.

Afzal’s eyes lingered on him for a moment — disappointed, unreadable — then he turned and walked out of the room.

As the door closed, Zain let out a long breath, his shoulders slumping.

“Every single time, it’s Nabeel Bhai and Aiza Appo’s examples! Now that they’re so educated — is that my fault?” he muttered bitterly, kicking off his shoes one by one.

In that quiet, the house felt colder than ever — not because of the night, but because of the distance between a father and a son who had long stopped understanding each other.

✦✦✦✦

Nazli knocked gently on Amir's door. He opened it at once, fussing with the cuff of his shirt as if the tiny ritual steadied him.

"Bhai, what should I make for breakfast? Omelet or..." Nazli began, but Amir cut her off.

"I'm not eating anything. Tell Ammi that until she agrees to what I've said, I will not eat in this house." He snapped the last button into place; his words tumbled out in a hurry.

For a moment Nazli only watched him in silence.

"But, Bhai, how can things go on like this?" she asked, voice catching with a thread of worry.

"This is how they will go on now." He shrugged, grabbed his motorcycle keys and strode from the room. Nazli remained, the knock still warm on her palm.

Roshan Ara arrived moments later, eyes sharp at the sight of Amir's retreating figure.

"What happened? What did he say?" she asked.

"Nothing, he said he won't eat at home until his demand is accepted."

"Let him not eat! He must be eating at that girl's house. That's how these girls trap boys nowadays." Roshan Ara's head shook with certainty as she turned to leave.

"But Ammi, what if Bhai really stops eating at home for good?" Nazli's concern clung to her last words.

"Nothing like that will happen. These are just two or four days of drama, nothing more." With that assurance, Roshan Ara went on her way. Nazli stood still for a long moment, listening to the house settle back into its ordinary rhythms.

✦✦✦

At the college library, the three friends signed in at the counter — names, arrival time, petty formalities — then drifted toward their usual table. Their morning classes ran from nine to eleven; afterward they came to the library to study, to take notes, and sometimes, to whisper away an hour. College ended at four, but for them the library was a kind of refuge: quiet, uncrowded, a place where they could be earnest or light-hearted as the mood commanded. Most classmates spent free time in the cafeteria or on the lawns; anyone who favoured the library was politely labelled "boring." Nazli, Falak, and Sarah didn't mind the label. Their friendship had been forged in schoolrooms and exam halls; together they had been among the brightest students

in their cohort. When they walked into the city's best college for Intermediate Pre-Medical, their success seemed almost preordained. Their first-year results were outstanding, and already they dreamed of the three of them entering medical school together.

They took their usual table — an island of empty chairs around them.

"Nazli, I don't think your dream was an ordinary one," Sarah said, laying her phone on the table after silencing it.

"I'm telling you the same," Falak agreed at once.

"And I don't find that dream unusual at all — maybe a little foolish, yes. I only told it to you both for fun, and you took it seriously." Nazli smoothed her hair without turning toward them.

"I'm connecting that dream to your future," Sarah said, peering at Nazli as if she could read the days ahead.

"Exactly! I was thinking the same — maybe one day Nazli really will win the Best Face of the Year award." Falak chimed in with eager eyes.

"I have no such illusion. There's nothing particularly special about my face. It's only Allah's blessing that He gave me a pleasant one," Nazli replied, calm as ever.

"Well, I'm looking at that dream from a different perspective," Sarah persisted. "In my opinion, that dream is a sign from Allah of a very bright future for you."

"Fear God, Sarah! Do you think Allah will show me sitting in the world of showbiz, receiving a Best Face of the Year award, as a sign of a bright future? Astaghfirullah!" Nazli clapped a hand to her ears in playful repentance. Falak burst into laughter.

"He'll give you a sign that suits your kind of person. You're no saint, after all! The kind of thoughts that go through your mind all day — you'll dream according to that," Sarah said, keeping the mood light.

"I never think about standing on stage winning that kind of award!" Nazli said, gazing through the library's wide glass window at leaves still wet from rain, tapping the pane with a soft rhythm.

"Don't mind, but from what I've observed of you, I think such thoughts do come to your mind sometimes," Sarah replied, following her gaze.

"What have you observed, exactly?" Nazli turned to her.

“That no one has ever given you the importance you deserve — neither for your intelligence nor for your beauty,” Sarah said bluntly.

“I’ve felt that too,” Falak added, glancing up from her phone.

“I don’t crave people doing all that for me,” Nazli answered, with a small, deflecting smile.

“Nazli, that’s the biggest lie you’ve told so far. The more you try to hide the loneliness and deprivation inside you, the more they show on your face,” Sarah said gently. Nazli bristled.

“Deprivation is too strong a word. Why would I be deprived of anything?” she asked.

“Every human being has a deep desire — to be acknowledged and loved. I read somewhere: ‘We all have a strong desire to be observed, considered, esteemed, praised, beloved, and admired.’ Every effort and struggle we make is, in one way or another, for the sake of being loved or appreciated,” Sarah explained.

“You believe too much in what’s written in books. Practical life is very different,” Nazli shrugged.

“Then why do we study, work hard, and strive to move forward? Even an uneducated person can manage two meals a day. But we don’t just want two meals — we want a good life, and for that, we need many things. We don’t want to achieve everything and then sit alone; we long for someone to admire us, to appreciate us.” Sarah’s voice softened.

“I don’t think it’s that important,” Nazli said, still unconvinced.

“We are human, not animals. And what hurts humans the most is being unacknowledged — especially by their own. That sense of being unappreciated exists somewhere inside you too,” Sarah said.

“Why would people leave everything and sit around admiring me?” Nazli asked after a pause, looking out at the grey sky.

Falak, fingers flying over messages, listened without interruption. “Falak and I haven’t done anything remarkable either, but we don’t suffer from loneliness and depression like you do,” Sarah added.

“That’s because I’m an only child. Since childhood, everyone has treated my every act and success as something special. And it’s the same with Falak — her parents

care for her deeply, and whatever small gap remains, her fiancé fills it now," Sarah said, a touch defensive.

"It's not that nobody at home cares about me," Nazli added hastily.

"How would we know? You're the one who says no one at your house even notices when your results come out or when you top the class. Even your paintings are lying in the storeroom gathering dust. No one ever thought of framing them and hanging them in the house — whereas not only Falak and I, but everyone who has ever seen your art was impressed." Sarah's list of grievances spilled out with the ease of someone who had long watched a friend retreat.

Sarah believed Nazli's gifts were rare — beauty, intelligence, sensitivity, and artistry bundled together in a way that most people never encountered. "I think being loved — truly loved — is indeed the most beautiful feeling in the world," Falak said at last, looking up from her phone.

"I'm not just talking about romantic love," Sarah clarified.

"You mean my parents and family don't love me?" Nazli asked, searching their faces.

"How could it be that they don't love you? That's not what I mean. This isn't about parental love. Every person wants their good qualities, efforts, and virtues to be noticed and acknowledged. If not, it leaves a wound on the soul — a feeling that we hold no importance for anyone," Sarah insisted.

"Well, you won't understand," Nazli said with a resigned sigh. "I think we should start studying now — that's what we came here for, anyway." Sarah began picking up her books; Falak nodded and opened hers. Nazli remained by the window, Sarah's words circling in her mind like stray birds. Was it true? she wondered.

✦✦✦✦

At a bank in the city, Zain took money from the console, stepped out of his car and scanned the morning bustle: cars in neat rows, a few pedestrians, the ordered hurry of a business day. He typed quickly on his phone and walked into the foreign bank. Within fifteen minutes he had withdrawn one hundred and fifty thousand rupees from Huma's account, a cheque bearing a forged signature folded into crisp inevitability.

"Thank you very much," he said after counting, sliding the cash into an envelope and pressing it into the manager's hand with practiced politeness. A few courteous words exchanged, he left through the bank's main doors.

In the parking lot he tucked the envelope beneath the driver's seat, started the car, plugged in his headphones and dialled a number as he reversed smoothly onto the service road.

"Yes, Arsalan! Now turn on Mom's phone and listen — keep the mobile with you until I reach home. If the bank calls, do exactly as I told you. Bye." He ended the call, removed the headphones and turned up the stereo.

Lyrics from an English song filled the car as he drove:
"I don't care if it hurts
I want to have control
I want a perfect body.."

He let the music play, the city spreading out ahead like possibility and danger braided together.

✦✦✦

When Zain stepped into the house, Arsalan was already waiting for him, restless and tense. They were more than cousins — they had grown up together, studied together since childhood, and were now classmates in their A-Levels. A single glance between them was enough to exchange a world of understanding; Arsalan's disapproving shake of the head said everything that words did not. Seeing a few of the household staff lingering in the TV lounge, both boys hurried silently up the staircase.

Once inside Zain's room, he locked the door with habitual caution.

"Thank God you came back before Aunty woke up," Arsalan exhaled, sinking into the sofa.

"Thanks for helping me," Zain said, his voice calm but grateful. He took the envelope thick with cash, along with his car keys, and placed both in the wardrobe drawer of his dressing room. Then he locked it again with deliberate care.

"For God's sake, now switch Auntie's cell phone on and put it back in her room," Arsalan reminded him.

"No, I'll give it back to her in the evening after the bank closes," Zain replied, slipping the phone casually into his jeans pocket.

"You mean around five in the evening?" Arsalan looked at him in disbelief. "It's only eleven-thirty now. What will you do for so long? Aunty will definitely start looking for her phone once she wakes up."

“Mom will look for it for a while,” Zain said lightly, “and then she’ll start using her other phone. I’ll *‘find’* it for her in the evening.” The emphasis he placed on the word carried a sly confidence, as though he had already rehearsed every detail.

“Zain, you get so much pocket money from your parents — why do you deceive them?” Arsalan’s voice was heavy with disapproval, almost pleading.

“All the money my parents have is mine anyway,” Zain said with a shameless shrug. “Better it comes to my use than anyone else’s. And I don’t deceive them — I just make minor adjustments once in a month or two, a lakh or two here and there.”

“I’m starting to feel guilty just being part of this,” Arsalan muttered, turning on the television to avoid his gaze.

At that moment, a knock came at the door. The cousins exchanged a quick look. Zain, unbothered, went to open it.

“Bibi ji is calling you,” Kareem announced politely from the hallway.

“Tell her I’m coming,” Zain said, closing the door again.

“Here, keep this phone safe,” he said, handing Arsalan the mobile from his pocket.

“I’m not keeping it. You handle it yourself,” Arsalan said flatly, eyes still fixed on the screen.

Zain didn’t argue. He crossed to the cupboard, slipped the phone inside, and closed it quietly. Then, without another word, he unlocked the door and stepped out.

As he descended the stairs, he could already hear his mother’s voice from below — issuing instructions, most likely to the servants. Huma had just woken up. Her mornings began late, around eleven-thirty or twelve, after the house staff had finished their cleaning. Breakfast for Afzal and Zain was always handled by the servants; lunch, too, was prepared according to Huma’s instructions from the previous night. By the time she rose, her only task was to inspect what had already been done.

“Morning,” Zain greeted cheerfully as he reached the last stair.

“Kareem told me you went somewhere early this morning. Where did you go alone? Arsalan was here too — why didn’t you take him?” Her tone was worried, and her questions came in a quick succession.

“Yes, I went to a friend’s house. He needed some software CDs from me.” Zain’s ease with falsehood was almost artful; he lied as naturally as he breathed.

“Oh, okay. What did Afzal say to you last night?” She hadn’t forgotten the unpleasant scene of the previous evening.

“The same lecture as always, what else!” Zain replied carelessly.

“And because of you, I had to listen to the same lecture too. I’m sick of your constant problems, Zain. For God’s sake, fix your behaviour before it’s too late.” Huma’s voice carried weary irritation.

“Okay, I promise — just don’t stay angry with me, Mom, please.” Zain slipped an arm affectionately around her shoulders; he knew too well how easily her anger melted under a show of tenderness.

“Son, you really need to start taking life seriously now. Afzal is right,” she said, her tone softening, maternal concern replacing the earlier annoyance.

“Promise — nothing like this will ever happen again.” Zain lifted her hand and kissed it.

To Huma, he was still a little boy — mischievous, headstrong, but hers. She could never stay upset with him for long.

“We’ll see how well you keep your word in front of Afzal. You always make such promises,” she said absently, half-smiling. “Anyway, I can’t find my cell phone. Call my number, will you?”

“Sure,” Zain said. He dialled her number and put it on loudspeaker, already anticipating the message.

“Your phone is switched off,” he said casually.

“I have to go to the parlour — where on earth did I put it?” Huma pressed a hand to her forehead, frowning as she tried to recall. Looking perplexed, she returned to her bedroom.

It was common for her to misplace things; the household was long accustomed to it. And no one exploited that habit more cleverly than her own son.

“I got a call from your friend Kiran. She said you’re not answering her,” Arsalan said, stepping into the room as Zain flopped down onto the sofa.

Zain sighed. “Mom’s going to the parlour in a while. Once she’s gone, take out the cigarette pack,” he murmured, eyes fixed on the television.

Arsalan looked at him sharply but chose to steer the conversation elsewhere. “By the way, you and Kiran — does she know you’re also involved with Farheen?”

“I’m not involved with any girl. I just keep them in my life for passing time,” Zain replied, still watching the screen.

“You’re taking advantage of your looks and charm, Zain — committing the sin of flirting for no reason.” Arsalan’s words were gentle but edged with reproach.

Though close in friendship, the cousins were opposites in nature. Arsalan, barely eighteen, possessed a maturity beyond his years; Zain, though two years older, drifted recklessly through life. Their families were equally wealthy, yet privilege had not spoiled Arsalan as it had Zain. He often went along with his cousin’s schemes out of loyalty, but when his conscience intervened, he refused without hesitation. It had taken Zain ten whole days of persuasion to enlist his help this time — to sit by the landline and answer calls while he executed his plan at the bank. Zain had switched off Huma’s mobile and hidden it in his room, leaving Arsalan to keep the landline busy in case the bank tried to reach her.

“I never force any girl to befriend me,” Zain said firmly. “Nor do I make false promises of love. I always keep everything clear from the start. If girls themselves come to me, how is that my fault?”

He wasn’t wrong — girls were the ones who approached him first, who confessed their feelings with hopeful eyes. His charm, his wealth, his careless confidence — together they created the perfect storm. Zain indulged them, dated them, spent time, shared laughter, but never attachment.

“My conscience is perfectly clear — I’ve never deceived anyone,” he added, turning back toward the television with serene arrogance.

“But you are deceiving your parents,” Arsalan said quietly.

“I’ll ask them for forgiveness when the time comes,” Zain replied with a faint, careless smile, shrugging his shoulders. “For God’s sake, let me have some peace now.”

He leaned back, eyes glued to the flashing screen, as though the world outside it — with all its guilt, love, and consequence — simply did not exist.

✦✦✦✦

When Nazli got off the college bus she waited on the right-hand side of the road for the heavy traffic to subside. She wanted to cross the road and walk toward her home. After a little while she crossed and started walking on the cracked, broken pavement. Her college was in one of the best areas of the city; whenever she returned home after an hour's commute and entered her middle-class neighbourhood, she felt a brief pang of sadness looking at the broken streets. Sometimes she cursed the municipality, sometimes the litterers, and she would walk from the bus stop to home on foot. She admired Falak and Sarah, both residents of the city's clean, well-kept neighbourhoods. Whenever she returned home with a downcast heart, the new daily problems within the house only made her sadder.

Today was no different. Around five in the evening, when she arrived home, she noticed worry on her mother Roshan Ara's face. Nazli greeted her and walked toward her room. After putting her bag in the room, the first thing she did was ask her mother what had caused today's trouble.

"What happened, Ammi? You look worried," she asked, finding her mother whispering to Nazli's elder sister, Sana, about some issue.

"Nothing happened. Make yourself some tea and make some for your father too — he should be back any moment," Roshan Ara said, ignoring Nazli's question.

"But why are you all worried?" Nazli repeated.

"Sana's in-laws have asked for a wedding date — there was a call today," Roshan Ara replied.

"What did you say?" Nazli asked.

"For now I didn't give any answer. I'll speak to your father first. This is their third demand in the last three months. Your father's business isn't doing particularly well; in such circumstances how can I give them a wedding date?" Roshan Ara said, looking anxiously at both daughters.

"Don't be so worried. Tell them if they're in such a hurry they should find someone else," Sana said impatiently to calm their anxious mother. She was herself very tired of the whole matter. Sana was just one year younger than Amir and after graduation she had stopped further studies. Because she was pretty, proposals had come for her soon after matriculation, and three years ago, when a suitable match appeared, her engagement had been arranged with a middle-class family like theirs. Her fiancé Shehzad worked at officer level in a company in Qatar. After the engagement, Sana's

mind turned more to her fiancé and her in-laws than to studies, so she'd barely passed her BA final papers and had given up on further education.

"You're crazy — should I break the engagement and bring disgrace to the family, so everyone says there was something wrong with the girl and the engagement fell apart? Are matches that easy to find these days?" Roshan Ara scolded Sana.

"But that's not a solution either, that they should keep asking us for a wedding date on the phone. Shehzad himself said he never asked his family to marry so quickly — who knows why they're doing this?" Sana tried to smooth things over for her mother, defending Shehzad.

"Shehzad's mother says once she marries off her son she'll be free of responsibility for her other sons," Roshan Ara added, imparting more information. "But right now my head has been spoiled by Amir. If he hadn't fallen in love, I'd finish my daughters' weddings first and then marry off my son," Roshan Ara exclaimed angrily.

Seeing her mother and sister arguing, Nazli went into the kitchen. She knew Amir's desire and stubbornness about marriage had sparked many problems in the household. Nazli's father's financial situation was such that he could not afford a daughter's wedding next year. His furniture shop barely covered the monthly expenses of their seven-member family. Nazli's brother, instead of studying further and becoming his father's pillar, had taken support from the family business. Because the household lived on limited income, they were forced to choke many of their own desires. Nazli's life was not like Falak's or Sarah's. She had never gone out to dinner with her family, nor could she go to a movie with cousins like her friends. Whenever they tried to include her in plans, she refused openly, because she knew that such expensive outings were beyond her means; her pride would not let her enjoy herself at her friends' expense. She owned the cheapest model among the smartphones. A few months ago Falak had created a Facebook account for her. Her friends list was short: Falak, Sarah, some cousins, and a couple of classmates.

Nazli finished eating and went back to her room lost in thought. Sana took some clothes from the wardrobe and glanced at Nazli.

"What's wrong?" Sana asked, seeing her distant expression.

"I don't understand what will happen to this house. Amir bhai has gone and decided to marry against our father's wishes. I don't know what's come over him — he's behaving so strangely these days. He should be thinking about your wedding," Nazli said.

“Yes, I’ve been thinking the same since morning. Don’t worry about my wedding — it will happen. Shehzad doesn’t want it right now; it’s his family who are in a hurry,” Sana said; she wasn’t too worried about her own marriage because her fiancé preferred a delay — convincing his family to wait was Shehzad’s responsibility.

“But Amir is a problem,” Sana added with regret.

“Why, has anything else happened?” Nazli asked, surprised.

“No, but his behaviour has become more extreme. Up until now things were being discussed calmly,” Sana replied as she folded clothes.

“What could have happened to him to make him change so much?” Nazli asked innocently.

“Love does that — it changes grown people,” Sana said, putting the clothes away.

“But still, look at all the opposition in the house, and how much your in-laws are insisting on your wedding. Your brother should be minding your wedding now,” Nazli said and sat on the bed with a book in her hands.

“Love blinds you — no matter what Ammi does, Amir will get married there,” Sana said confidently.

“Really? How can he possibly do that?” Nazli asked in astonishment.

“Don’t you see how he fights everyone? He doesn’t care about anyone,” Sana said, shrugging.

“Yes, really — for two days he’s even stopped eating and drinking,” Nazli said sadly.

“If that girl comes in front of me, I will strangle her. What chaos she has brought into this house,” Sana said angrily. “What’s sad is that he doesn’t realize he should be supporting his father and working to expand the business.” Sana sat on the bed.

“I don’t know how he’s become so selfish — he wasn’t like this before,” Nazli said seriously.

“And if people find out about his stubbornness, how much disgrace will fall on our family? We don’t have a tradition of love-marriage in our family,” Sana added thoughtfully.

“But I do feel pity for him,” Nazli said.

“If you feel so much pity, then tell Ammi to go and bring the proposal — bring home your sister-in-law,” Sana suggested with a touch of irony.

“I’m not foolish enough to give Ammi that suggestion. If she doesn’t listen to Amir bhai, why would she listen to me?” Nazli said, opening the book on the table and turning its pages. Sana finished her sentence and left the room.

✦✦✦

Javaid had just returned from the morning prayers. He removed his *namaz* cap, placed it neatly on the bedside table, and was about to sit down when Roshan Ara entered, her expression heavy with unrest. She had been pacing restlessly since morning, the worry about Amir festering in her chest, but she hadn’t yet found a moment to speak with her husband.

“For one thing, your son has made our lives hell,” Roshan Ara declared, sitting down with a sigh that carried both exhaustion and fury.

“So, he brought up the marriage again?” Javaid asked quietly, already knowing the answer.

“He threatened this morning,” she replied grimly.

Javaid paused, considering. “I think you should accept his demand. I know the girl’s father; he’s been our customer for years.”

“Then tell him to take his shopping home and stop pushing his daughter onto us,” Roshan Ara shot back, her sarcasm sharp as a knife. She sat stiffly on the edge of the bed, arms crossed.

“He’s been fond of your son for a while now — he’s even asked me several times to take the proposal to their house,” Javaid said gently, his tone calm and conciliatory, the voice of a man used to soothing storms rather than creating them.

“Be careful what you encourage. I won’t marry my son before my daughters are married. Sana’s mother-in-law is calling every day asking for dates,” she said, her tone now steady and firm.

“When have I ever insisted on marrying him off early?” Javaid asked mildly.

“Then scold him — how does he find the courage to argue with his parents for a girl?” Roshan Ara’s lips pressed tightly together, her patience running thin.

“I haven’t been strict only because he’s our youngest son,” Javaid admitted, his tone softening. There was truth in that — a gentle bias he had never denied. Amir was his pride, his weakness. Roshan Ara knew this well.

“A young son shouldn’t be disobedient. We’ll bring him a good match — a girl from a respectable family. I won’t let just anyone’s daughter become our daughter-in-law,” she said, her anger simmering beneath the surface.

At that moment, Nazli appeared hesitantly at the door.

“Ammi, Amir Bhai isn’t eating,” she said softly, aware of the tension in the air.

“Why isn’t he eating?” Roshan Ara’s voice snapped like a whip.

“He says he won’t eat the food of this house anymore,” Nazli answered, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Tell him that hunger strikes won’t make me take his proposal to that girl’s house. If he doesn’t want to eat, let him not eat,” Roshan Ara retorted, her expression hard as stone.

“What will you do if he leaves the house tomorrow?” Javaid asked quietly, testing her defiance.

“That won’t happen — he’s, my son; I know what he’s made of,” Roshan Ara said sharply. Then, turning to Nazli, she ordered, “Go and set the tray; let him starve a day or two — he’ll come to his senses.”

Nazli looked briefly toward her father, uncertain, but when he said nothing, she turned and left.

Javaid sighed, unwilling to prolong the quarrel. He stretched out on the bed, while Roshan Ara continued to mutter to herself, the words indistinct but bitter.

✦✦✦

The next day Nazli had no college. In the soft light of the afternoon, she stood before the mirror after washing her face, combing through her long hair with absent grace. Her reflection looked back at her — thoughtful, distant — when the door burst open. Ameen, her younger brother, came charging in, a football tucked under his arm, his school uniform still creased from play. Behind him followed little Shereen, equally breathless.

“You gave me those math questions, right? Miss Shakira said they’re all wrong,” Ameen complained, his face scrunched in irritation. He was in seventh grade — quick-tempered, talkative, and often in trouble. Nazli, by routine, was responsible for helping both Ameen and Shermeen with their homework.

“Your Miss Shakira always says that, but still you come first in class — I’ve never understood that” Nazli replied impatiently, brushing her hair back with a flick.

“He gets first by cheating,” Shermeen taunted, her laughter mischievous.

“I’m not like you,” Ameen snapped, glaring at her.

“All right, don’t you two start a fight at this hour,” Nazli warned, sensing the storm brewing.

“Nazli, come here!” Roshan Ara’s voice suddenly rang from the corridor.

“All right, Ammi,” Nazli called back. She had barely tied her hair when Roshan Ara appeared again, her tone urgent. Nazli set her comb down and followed her mother toward the kitchen.

As soon as she entered, she found Roshan Ara hurriedly setting plates on a tray.

“Listen — take this and give it to Amir,” she said briskly, arranging the food with more force than care.

“You asked me not to give the food to Amir Bhai?” Nazli reminded her cautiously.

“No, you take it and try to reason with him too. Tell him to think about his elderly parents — understand?” Roshan Ara’s tone was clipped, impatient.

Nazli nodded silently, lifted the tray, and walked down the corridor toward Amir’s room. She knocked softly before entering. Amir was lying on the bed, phone in hand, tapping out a message. He didn’t look up when Nazli entered.

“Why did you bring this? I’m not eating,” he said flatly, eyes glued to the screen.

“Amir Bhai, what’s wrong with you? Who gives up eating at their own home?” Nazli said, her voice edged with frustration.

“We give up when our own family doesn’t consider us their own,” Amir replied, his tone sharp but wounded.

“Who told you no one considers you their own? Don’t think that way,” Nazli pleaded gently.

“You don’t want to accept Anita, so by that logic you don’t accept me either,” Amir said, his hurt showing through his defiance.

“Think of Ammi and Baba as well. They’re saying all this for your good. And right now, Baba doesn’t even have the means to arrange your marriage,” Nazli reasoned.

“If Baba had the means, Anita would already be married. Her proposals keep coming — she can’t wait forever,” Amir said bitterly.

“Leave it. Ammi brought the food herself, so at least eat something,” Nazli coaxed, pushing the tray a little closer.

“I won’t eat until Ammi and Baba take my proposal seriously,” Amir said, his voice stubborn.

Just then, the door opened again — Roshan Ara entered, her expression thunderous. She had been standing outside long enough to hear everything.

“You just keep repeating like a parrot — proposal, proposal, proposal!” she burst out, her patience gone.

“Let the whole world object, I’ve decided to marry Anita,” Amir said evenly, unmoved by her fury.

“Shame on you to speak like this in front of your sisters. Be a big brother — think of them! Get them married first, otherwise you’ll be standing there taking your own baraat!” Roshan Ara shouted, her anger now mixed with scorn.

“I can support my sisters even after my marriage. I’m not going anywhere,” Amir replied sharply.

“If you were a man of honour, you’d die rather than display such shamelessness. What lesson are you teaching your sisters — that they should run off and marry on their own?” she lashed out, her voice trembling with rage.

“You already got Sana engaged,” Amir said, anger flaring.

“And Nazli and Shermeen are like dead already, aren’t they?” Roshan Ara shot back, her sarcasm cutting.

“Nazli and Shermeen still have time for marriage, but if I delay Anita’s, her father may find someone else for her,” Amir said, trying to remain steady.

“You’re hurting your mother’s heart for the sake of one girl; God punish you, Amir,” Roshan Ara cried, her voice breaking into curses and lamentation.

“Ammi, please! If you can’t bless your children, you don’t even have the right to curse them!” Amir’s voice rose in anger.

“Nazli, take the food and go — he’s not worth spoiling for his whims!” Roshan Ara shouted, her temper reaching its peak.

“Who says to get indulged into this? Besides, I have given up food; maybe I’ll leave the house in a few days,” Amir said hotly.

“Go now — what are you waiting for? Maybe the in-laws are ready to take you!” Roshan Ara’s sarcasm turned venomous.

“If you keep saying such things, I will do something and you will regret it,” Amir warned, his voice trembling with restrained fury.

“I will say such things and watch how you don’t listen. Nazli, pick up that tray — what are you standing there for?” Roshan Ara ordered, glaring at her daughter.

Nazli flinched and began lifting the tray.

“Shameless one,” Roshan Ara hissed, her eyes burning with resentment as she stormed out of the room.

Nazli looked at Amir, helpless and anxious, then quietly slipped out behind her mother — the tension in the air so heavy it seemed to follow her down the hallway like a shadow.

✦✦✦✦

Zain walked down the college corridor, his eyes wandering restlessly over the bustling scene. The air was filled with the pre-class rush — the shuffle of footsteps, snippets of laughter, and the faint hum of youthful chatter. Students streamed in and out of classrooms, books clutched to their chests, conversations overlapping like scattered melodies. Suddenly, a girl stepped directly into his path.

“Hi, Zain! I’m Sobia!” the girl greeted with an eager smile. She was not strikingly beautiful, yet there was a deliberate polish to her appearance — the kind that spoke of practiced confidence. Her westernized demeanour, casual poise, and fashionable haircut made her stand out.

“Hi — do I know you?” Zain responded, returning her smile with a hint of amusement.

“I’m new to this college, and I heard there’s only one IT genius here — and that’s you.” Sobia’s grin widened, her tone light and teasing.

“Yes, I know that” Zain replied, a trace of arrogance lacing his words.

“My Facebook account’s been hacked. Could you help me?” Sobia asked, her voice softening into a plea.

“That’s a complicated job. Why should I spend my time on that?” Zain asked, still smiling — a hint of playful challenge in his tone.

“Obviously to help me,” Sobia countered quickly.

“Why should I help you? I don’t even know you.” Zain teased, tilting his head slightly.

“You’ll get to know me this way. We’ll become friends, won’t we?” Sobia smiled again, her tone coy yet confident, and handed him a small piece of paper. “My Facebook ID and old password are written on it, and my mobile number is below,” she added, looking at him meaningfully.

“Okay, don’t worry — I’ll get it done.” Zain accepted the paper with a faint smile.

“I’ll wait for your call. I hope you’ll do this for me,” Sobia said as she slung her handbag over her shoulder, her expression holding a note of subtle flirtation. Zain returned her look — a glance filled with unspoken understanding.

Sobia turned and walked away. Zain folded the small scrap of paper and tucked it casually into his pocket before continuing down the corridor. Such encounters were nothing new to him — he received these little notes several times a day, some useful to his work, most not. Some girls even skipped the ritual entirely, finding his number elsewhere.

After meeting Zain, Sobia drifted toward a small group of girls standing near the lockers.

“Love — such a small thing. I actually talked to him,” Sobia said with a triumphant toss of her short, choppy hair.

“Wow. He’s so handsome. What did you say to him?” one of her friends asked eagerly, unable to hide her fascination with Zain.

“Nothing much — just gave him my cell phone number as an excuse,” Sobia said, her tone brimming with smug satisfaction.

“Every girl here wants to be friends with Zain, but he only pays attention to a few. I hear he’s very wealthy,” remarked another — a plain-looking girl whose disappointment carried the faint sting of envy. Perhaps she had once attempted to pass him a note herself.

“But now he’s my friend,” Sobia declared. The three girls burst into laughter and drifted toward their classroom, still giggling.

Inside the classroom, the hum of casual conversation filled the air as students waited for their teacher. Zain entered with a friend, his easy stride turning several heads. Two girls immediately stopped talking when he appeared in the doorway. One of them quickly lifted her bag from the seat beside her, silently offering him the place, but Zain walked past without acknowledgment. The second girl rose, moved to the back, and left the front seat free — yet he ignored that too and instead took an empty chair in the row beside Sobia, who was seated at the back. Their eyes met, and they exchanged knowing smiles.

When the teacher arrived, Zain lowered his head, began typing a message on his phone.

“Shall we go for coffee after class?”

A soft beep came from Sobia’s mobile. She glanced at it discreetly, and upon seeing Zain’s message, her lips curved in a smile. Her fingers flew over the keypad in quick reply.

“Classes end at three; we can go after that?”

Zain read her response and smiled faintly.

“Okay, I’ll wait for you at the café/terrace,” he texted back.

Sobia slipped her phone back into her bag, her smile lingering. Meanwhile, the two girls who had earlier competed for Zain’s attention watched them closely, their expressions darkening. When class ended, both were burning with jealousy.

“Sobia stopped Zain today and gave him her number — that’s why he went and sat with her,” the first girl said bitterly.

“From now on, I won’t give him any lifts,” the second snapped.

“Me neither, even if he follows me everywhere,” the first retorted, tossing her hair disdainfully.

“Has he ever followed you?” the second asked dryly.

“No, but he might someday,” the first said haughtily.

The second girl merely gave her a long, silent look — as though trying to diagnose a sickness she couldn’t quite name.

✦✦✦✦

Nazli sat at the café-terrace with Falak and Sarah, the three of them waiting for their class to begin. The terrace buzzed with the hum of conversation and the clinking of teacups.

“Did you hear what happened to Anam?” Falak asked, nibbling at a snack.

“What happened?” Nazli leaned forward, curious.

“They’ve expelled her from college,” Falak said casually.

“Really? Why?” Nazli asked in surprise.

“Yes, I heard it too,” Sarah added between bites.

“But what happened?” Nazli pressed, anxious now.

“She was caught on a date in the background with a boy — holding hands,” Falak said bluntly.

“Oh. Well, then that’s deserved. Who was the boy?” Nazli asked, eyebrows raised.

“He was from the same college, but still — Anam’s reputation is ruined and they expelled her,” Sarah said with sympathy.

“If she acted like that, that’s what she deserved. She was a bad girl,” Nazli remarked, her tone indifferent.

“We don’t know if she was bad. Maybe she truly loved him. We shouldn’t judge,” Sarah said quietly.

“But to parade love around in college like that — it’s beyond me,” Nazli replied carelessly, popping another bite into her mouth.

“Zara was saying they were about to get engaged,” Falak added.

“After all that, of course there won’t be an engagement. They both are disgraced; their families will have found out,” Nazli said, her voice laced with disapproval.

“It depends whether the boy stands by her or not. I’ve heard he’s from a very rich family,” Sarah offered thoughtfully.

“Then he definitely won’t get engaged to Anam — what’s her status? She’s too bold for our taste; it wasn’t right,” Nazli’s conservative tone revealed itself. Falak and Sarah exchanged a quick glance, surprised by the severity in her voice. Nazli simply finished her snack, brushing the crumbs from her fingers.

✦✦✦

After the fierce arguments between Roshan Ara and Amir over his marriage, the house had fallen into uneasy quiet for several days. Amir no longer spoke to his parents; he had stopped eating at home altogether and returned late each night. The family — even Nazli — lived under a cloud of tension, their worry thick and unspoken. Roshan Ara believed that a few days of silence would break his stubbornness; surely, hunger and loneliness would make him yield.

That night, she lay in bed while Javaid sat nearby, finishing his diary entry. He took off his glasses, set them aside, and began to prepare for sleep.

“Has Amir called yet?” Roshan Ara asked anxiously — her tone betraying her maternal concern.

“No. It’s Sunday; he must be out with friends,” Javaid replied casually.

“He left in the morning. It’s already half past eleven at night — call him and find out where he is. Nazli called earlier, and he didn’t pick up,” Roshan Ara said, worry sharpening her voice.

“All right, it’s already half past eleven. I’ll call,” Javaid said thoughtfully. He put his glasses back on and reached for the phone — but before he could dial, the doorbell rang.

“He’s back, I think,” Javaid said, removing his glasses and heading toward the door. The bell rang again, louder this time.

“Wait, who is it? Be patient,” he muttered, quickening his steps.

“This is Amir, Baba,” came the voice from outside.

Javaid opened the gate — and immobilized. Amir stood there, dressed neatly, beside a young woman whose head was draped modestly in a dupatta. For a moment, the world seemed to tilt. Both of them wore garlands, their posture side by side unmistakably that of a couple newly wed.

Javaid gripped the gate, his composure faltering. The girl lowered her eyes, stepping slightly behind Amir’s shoulder.

“Where were you? We’ve been waiting,” Javaid asked after a pause, struggling to steady his voice.

“We were a little late, Baba,” Amir replied nervously.

“And who is this?” Javaid asked, adjusting his glasses, his tone caught between disbelief and dread.

“Baba… this is Anita — my wife. We got married,” Amir said hesitantly. Anita bowed her head in silent greeting.

“Wife? Wha… what are you saying?” Javaid stammered.

“Yes, that’s how it is, Baba. I had no other option. I told you many times, but you never listened to me,” Amir said plainly.

“Who’s there?” Roshan Ara’s voice came at that moment.

“Amir is here,” Javaid answered, turning back toward the courtyard and glancing anxiously toward the street. Two or three passersby were walking nearby; their presence only deepened his unease.

“Come inside; don’t stand outside in the street. People are coming.” Javaid stepped aside, clearing the way. Amir and Anita entered silently. Javaid closed the gate behind them at once. They walked slowly toward the veranda, their footsteps echoing faintly on the tiled floor.

Roshan Ara emerged from her room and stopped short, staring at the unfamiliar girl beside her son as if struck by lightning.

“Where were you this late, and who did you bring?” Roshan Ara demanded, her eyes narrowing, her tone sharp and incredulous.

“Amir has married, Roshan Ara,” Javaid said in a low, deliberate voice, trying to steady the storm he knew was about to break.

“Married? Oh my God!” Roshan Ara gasped, pressing a trembling hand to her chest. Her eyes widened in disbelief as she turned toward her husband. Javaid stood beside her, silent and strained.

“What are you saying? He’s married?” Roshan Ara pointed an accusing finger at Amir, her voice shaking.

“Yes, that’s what he says,” Javaid replied quietly, his gaze fixed on their son.

“But how could he marry?” Roshan Ara cried out, her voice rising in outrage.

“Speak softly, Roshan Ara,” Javaid urged, glancing nervously toward the courtyard gate.

“It’s not the time for speaking softly!” Roshan Ara snapped, her composure slipping.

“Don’t shout out at midnight — people will hear,” Javaid said, reaching forward instinctively to calm her, covering her mouth in panic.

“Say that softly? We’ve reached the day we’ve dreaded,” Roshan Ara wailed, wrenching free from his hand. Her cry rang through the quiet night, startling the house awake.

Her outburst brought Sana and Nazli rushing from their rooms. Both stood dumbstruck as they reached the courtyard — the scene before them shocking beyond measure. Their parents stood face to face with Amir and Anita; the young woman’s head remained bowed, her cheeks wet with tears that gleamed under the dim light.

“Ammi, I told you many times to take my proposal to her family, but you didn’t listen,” Amir said at last, his voice steady though his face was pale.

“So, you married her yourself?” Roshan Ara shouted, almost choking on disbelief.

“You said, ‘Do what you must,’” Amir replied bitterly.

“If you had to take a step, you might as well have drowned in a well — why do all this?” Roshan Ara retorted, her fury finding no outlet but words.

“But I already did it — married her,” Amir said boldly, though guilt flickered faintly behind his eyes.

“Get out of my house — go away. I won’t keep you or your wife,” Roshan Ara cried, lunging toward Anita in blind rage. Amir instantly stepped between them, shielding her.

“Ammi, don’t touch her. She’s my wife now.”

“Oh! He stands proud in front of his mother for this girl. Go die, you miserable one — get out!” Roshan Ara screamed, her voice breaking as tears streamed down her face. She shoved Amir in fury; Javaid caught her arm just in time.

“What’s happened, Roshan Ara? Pull yourself together,” Javaid said, struggling to restrain her. Shermeen and Ameen appeared, still half asleep, drawn by the shouting. They stared in wide-eyed confusion, unable to comprehend the chaos unfolding before them.

“No — I don’t even want to look at that shameless one,” Roshan Ara cried, gasping for breath.

“Enough — where will he go at this hour? We have a reputation in the neighbourhood,” Javaid said, still holding her arm.

“Take her back to the place you brought her from,” Roshan Ara hissed, glaring at Anita with pure disdain. The young girl began to sob quietly, her hands trembling as she looked helplessly toward Amir.

“Ammi, I won’t accept anything bad said about my wife. If I’ve married her, I can take her somewhere else,” Amir said angrily, his voice firm despite his shaking hands.

“Yes, get out — take her. I don’t want to see either of your faces,” Roshan Ara shouted, her voice hoarse. She lunged forward again, but Nazli and Sana quickly held her back.

“Ammi, calm down — you might fall ill,” Sana pleaded softly, tears welling in her own eyes.

“Amir, go to your room with Anita,” Javaid said suddenly, his voice low but commanding. He looked at his son with both anger and pity.

“Why send them to a room? Beat them and throw them out — what a feat he’s done, bringing a girl home,” Roshan Ara spat bitterly.

“Say it softly, Roshan Ara; the neighbourhood will hear,” Javaid whispered urgently.

“Let them hear! Let everyone know our son brought a girl home at midnight,” Roshan Ara shrieked, defiant even in despair.

“Son, go to your room and do as I say,” Javaid repeated through clenched teeth.

“No — either divorce her or leave this house. They can’t stay here,” Roshan Ara declared, trembling with rage.

“Ammi, this is my father’s house too, not only yours,” Amir shot back, his patience gone.

“Roshan Ara, be quiet. I’ll see what to do,” Javaid said quickly, alarmed by how the argument was spiralling.

“Then he won’t stay here anymore. I won’t accept him as my child — just as he didn’t consider me his mother,” Roshan Ara wailed, collapsing into sobs.

“I had no other choice. Anita’s family would have married her off in a week if I hadn’t married her,” Amir said helplessly, looking at his mother’s tear-streaked face.

“Oh God, what sins did I commit to be tested like this by my child?” Roshan Ara cried, lifting her hands toward the ceiling before sinking into a chair in the courtyard, weeping uncontrollably.

Nazli and Sana rushed to her side to console her. Shermeen and Ameen stood nearby, frozen in shock. Javaid, now exhausted, spoke firmly:

“Amir, go to your room now. Leave this place.”

Amir took Anita’s hand. The two turned slowly and walked away. Behind them, Roshan Ara’s sobs filled the stillness of the house.

“What a foolish thing our brother has done, Baba,” Sana said tearfully as Amir disappeared down the hall.

“It’s all your fault. The first time he mentioned it you should’ve strangled him then,” Roshan Ara cried, blaming Javaid through her tears.

“Please, calm down. That’s enough crying, Roshan Ara,” Javaid said, pressing a finger to his lips in a futile attempt to hush her.

“You shouldn’t have given him so much freedom,” she said bitterly, her voice trembling.

“Roshan Ara, he is my son. Be grateful he came home and married instead of disappearing,” Javaid replied, though his tone carried more fatigue than conviction.

“If he’d left, get him out — don’t want to see him,” she said abruptly, turning her face away.

“Say that now — later I’ll ask you if you still mean it. Enough of this crying,” Javaid snapped, losing patience at last.

Nazli and Sana exchanged worried glances as their mother continued to weep, rocking slightly in her chair.

“Sana, Ameen, Shermeen, go to your rooms. Nazli, you too,” Javaid instructed. The children obeyed reluctantly, their faces pale and confused. Shermeen and Ameen shuffled back to their rooms. Nazli lingered for a moment, her gaze resting on her mother before she turned away silently.

She and Sana walked together down the corridor, both lost in heavy thought. In their rooms, neither spoke. Sana sat stiffly on the bed, staring at the wall, while Nazli leaned against a chair, her mind churning.

“Amir has caused this whole mess!” Nazli sighed at last, breaking the silence.

“Look what kind of girl she is — coming to someone’s house without a baraat, shameless,” Sana said scornfully.

“But how could a girl leave her home like that? I don’t understand it,” Nazli murmured, still bewildered.

“Ammi was right — we should have thrown them both out immediately,” Sana said, her voice thick with anger.

“Does Amir truly love that girl so much that he forgot all of us?” Nazli asked softly, lowering herself into a chair.

“I did warn you — Amir said he would marry only her. He was determined he wouldn’t marry anyone else,” Sana said with quiet bitterness.

“Maybe Amir was only helping her,” Nazli ventured weakly.

“What help? Those who elope don’t help — they ruin things,” Sana snapped.

“I don’t know. I’m stunned seeing all this,” Nazli admitted, rubbing her temples.

“Mark my words, that girl won’t last long with Amir. Girls who deceive parents to marry their choice never remain happy,” Sana said sharply.

“But how could Amir give so much importance to one girl?” Nazli asked, shaking her head.

“Girls trap boys like that. I told you we should have thrown them out,” Sana repeated, her voice rising with disgust.

“Until now I’d only read or seen such elopements in newspapers and on TV — today I saw it in my own home,” Nazli said with a cold sigh.

“Who knows how many people in the neighbourhood saw. She walked around with a garland — what nerve,” Sana said, shaking her head.

“Where would they have married?” Nazli wondered aloud.

“I don’t know. Ask if you want; I have no interest in those details,” Sana said curtly, adjusting her pillow and trying to lie down.

“I’m afraid Mom will drive him away completely and take her with him,” Nazli said after a pause, her tone anxious.

“Don’t worry; he doesn’t have the means to live separately,” Sana replied flatly. Nazli fell silent, deep in thought.

“Sana, I was saying—”

“I already have a headache; don’t add to it,” Sana interrupted, closing her eyes, though sleep was still far away. Nazli lay awake for a long while before finally turning off the lamp.

Roshan Ara cried through the night, tossing restlessly from side to side. Javaid lay awake beside her, staring at the ceiling. The clock hands crept forward, each tick marking another sleepless hour, until dawn finally broke. Javaid rose quietly to perform his ablutions. For Amir and Anita, the night felt less like a wedding night and more like an ending. Anita had left her father’s house under the pretence of attending a friend’s wedding. Her father, Ikram, had remarried a dozen years earlier after the death of her mother, bringing into the home her stepmother, Farida. In those twelve years, Farida had never allowed Anita to forget she was a stepdaughter. Then, about a year ago, a chance meeting with Amir had changed everything. The affection and validation she had long been denied made her quick to embrace his love, blind to consequence. Fearing that Farida might soon arrange her marriage elsewhere, Anita had agreed to elope. Her father — owner of a modest garment factory — adored her deeply, for she was the last living link to his first wife. But Farida had spent years erasing every memory of that woman, and now the time had come when she intended to send Anita away through marriage. As a child, Anita had once tried to complain about her stepmother’s cruelty, but Ikram’s mild reprimand only worsened her suffering. She had learned silence, learned to endure — until Amir appeared, and endurance turned to rebellion.

“I’ll call my father now,” Anita said quietly, her voice trembling.

“No, Anita… I’ve already faced one spectacle tonight. I can’t face another,” Amir said, weary.

Anita fell silent, tears welling in her eyes.

“I told you to be ready for anything. Don’t worry now,” Amir said, trying to soothe her, but she began to cry again.

“My father thinks I’m staying at Sidra’s for her wedding,” Anita whispered through tears.

“What a strange wedding of ours — no celebration, no mehndi, no baraat,” she said after a long pause, her voice breaking.

“If you had wanted such a wedding, you could have waited a few days. I could have convinced my family somehow,” Amir replied sharply, frustration slipping into his tone.

“What could I do? My stepmother kept telling my father about a new match — every day a new proposal,” Anita said, her voice heavy with resignation.

“Maybe it’s just my fate — no one lets me enjoy any happiness,” she sighed. Amir sank down beside her, the weight of exhaustion pressing on them both.

“You know, Amir — my birthdays have always been like this since mother’s death. Since father married again, nobody remembers them,” Anita said softly, her eyes brimming again.

“I don’t remember any birthdays either, but I’ll remember this wedding,” Amir said sadly.

“It seems every joy in my life will pass quietly and simply,” Anita whispered, wiping her tears with the corner of her dupatta.

✦✦✦

Next morning, Nazli stood in her neatly pressed college uniform, making breakfast in the kitchen. The clatter of utensils filled the quiet house. Beside her, Sana worked in silence, preparing more food. The air was heavy — a strange stillness hung between them. Suddenly, Javaid entered.

“Sana!” Javaid called falteringly.

“Yes?” Sana startled and turned, a flicker of apprehension in her eyes.

“Make your breakfast and bring some for your brother too,” Javaid said, glancing around the kitchen cautiously.

“For Amir Bhai?” Sana asked in surprise, her tone laced with disbelief. Nazli dismayed in the middle of buttering the paratha.

“Yes — and also… give breakfast to her as well,” Javaid faltered, his eyes darting toward the door to ensure no one was listening. He hesitated just short of calling Anita daughter-in-law.

Nazli looked at her father in astonishment.

“Why should we give her breakfast?” Sana asked, sounding almost like a child refusing an order she didn’t understand.

“There’s a person in our house now, so we must give food,” Javaid said haltingly, his voice carrying both reason and discomfort.

“But Ammi will go crazy if she sees,” Nazli warned, worry tightening her face at the thought of Roshan Ara’s temper.

“Just do what I say. Being cruel isn’t right either…” Javaid began softly, then left the kitchen without another word.

“Nazli, you do it — take the tray to Amir Bhai’s room and leave it,” Sana said finally, nodding toward the counter.

“It’ll feel strange,” Nazli admitted, her tone uneasy.

“But Baba told you, so do it,” Sana said briskly, pouring tea into cups. She wanted the matter over before their mother appeared.

Anita was sitting quietly in the room, slipping bangles onto her wrists when a sudden knock sounded at the door. Startled, she looked up, her heart skipping. She hesitated for a moment, then hurried to the bathroom door and called softly.

“Amir! Amir!” she knocked lightly on the door.

From inside came his voice, muffled by the sound of running water. “I’m bathing.”

“Someone knocked at the door,” Anita whispered, anxiety threading her words.

“Open it. Nothing will happen,” Amir replied calmly.

Anita paused, breath shallow. Then, summoning courage, she opened the door. Standing there was Nazli, holding a tray of breakfast.

Nazli stepped inside without meeting her eyes, set the tray neatly on the table, and turned to leave. Anita moved aside, silent and uneasy. As the door closed again, she leaned against it and exhaled shakily — a long-held breath of tension finally released. But Nazli’s relief was short-lived. As she stepped out of the room, she almost collided head-on with Roshan Ara.

“Where were you going?” Roshan Ara demanded, her tone sharp and commanding.

“I—Baba told me to serve breakfast,” Nazli stammered, guilt flaring in her voice.

“Did you poison the food instead?” Roshan Ara snapped, her glare fierce and unrelenting. Her eyes were swollen from a night of weeping; her face bore the marks of sleepless grief and anger.

“Baba asked me to, so I—” Nazli began nervously.

“From now on, if I ever see you going into that room again I’ll break your legs. Understand? Breakfast — what nonsense!” Roshan Ara thundered, brushing past her daughter. The hem of her dupatta swept angrily through the corridor as Nazli stepped quickly aside, trembling.

Javaid came into the room a short while later, fastening the buttons of his waistcoat. Roshan Ara stood by the bed, smoothing the sheet with harsh, mechanical movements. He watched her silently for a moment, then adjusted his wristwatch and finally spoke.

“I asked Amir to come to the shop. I’ll talk to him,” Javaid said after a hesitant pause.

Roshan Ara gave no reply.

“I’m worried — did he bring this girl with her family’s consent, or did they decide on their own?” Javaid continued, his tone calm but lined with concern.

“Do what you must. I won’t look at that wicked woman,” Roshan Ara replied sharply, her voice brittle with bitterness.

“We need a solution. Shouting won’t help,” Javaid said seriously, choosing his words with care.

“This is all your doing; otherwise, she wouldn’t have dared,” Roshan Ara accused, turning toward him with a glare.

“I never asked him to do this. I’m afraid her father might bring police if things go wrong,” Javaid said gravely.

Roshan Ara stiffened, the colour draining slightly from her face. Her eyes met his, startled.

“We must proceed carefully. Perhaps Amir hasn’t done anything foolish. I must talk to him and find a solution,” Javaid said, watching her reaction closely.

“If he really married her, then what?” Roshan Ara asked, her voice quieter now but tinged with dread.

“That’s what we’ll see. But you swear, don’t talk to that girl for now” Javaid replied firmly.

“What’s it to me? I want him to divorce her immediately,” Roshan Ara said sharply, her anger flaring again.

“Let me talk to him first — this could become a court case. Have patience,” Javaid urged, his voice low, reasoning.

“What do you mean?” Roshan Ara asked suspiciously, folding her arms.

“I mean the girl’s father might not be poor. It may be better not to risk a charge of kidnapping,” Javaid explained — an angle Roshan Ara hadn’t considered. Her face stiffened; she looked away, lips pressed tight.

“That’s why I say let me handle it carefully,” Javaid continued, emphasizing each word.

“Do what you like. I’m going to Khalida’s house,” Roshan Ara said abruptly, naming her sister as she snatched the bedsheet from the bed and flung it down in frustration. Her footsteps struck the floor like thunder as she stormed out of the room, leaving the air heavy with her rage and grief.

✦✦✦✦

“So your brother really did go and get married,” Sarah said as she and Nazli walked across the college grounds. The sun was mild, but Nazli’s face betrayed the heaviness pressing on her heart.

“Yes—he did, and in such a dramatic way,” Nazli exhaled, her tone a blend of disbelief and weariness.

“Well, your brother married in a filmi style—door opens and the groom stands with the bride,” Sarah laughed, amused by her own description.

“Very funny,” Nazli replied sharply, unable to share the humour.

“What’s your problem? Your brother’s happy, isn’t he?” Sarah said, lazily chewing her gum.

“Problem? If you had seen the spectacle last night at home,” Nazli retorted, her brows tightening at the memory.

“But often boys marry by their own choice,” Sarah remarked with casual indifference.

“They elope and bring the girl home at midnight?” Nazli’s voice carried disapproval, edged with embarrassment.

“Maybe he had no other option,” Sarah suggested thoughtfully.

“Sarah, how can someone be so crazy for a stranger that he throws away everything?” Nazli said, shaking her head. “Even Anam got caught at college and still got engaged to that guy later, though his parents didn’t approve. I’m so surprised.”

“True love is like that, Nazli. Boys like that are rare these days,” Sarah said, almost admiring Amir’s audacity.

“Breaking parents’ hearts is not bravery,” Nazli replied coldly.

“You try to make your parents understand that even though the marriage was wrong, if they’re happy, what’s the problem?” Sarah advised with a tone of worldly wisdom.

“Me? Who listens to me there?” Nazli said, glancing around as though someone might overhear.

“Why not? Aren’t you part of the household?” Sarah asked, puzzled.

“I don’t talk like that in front of my parents. I’m younger than Amir and Sana,” Nazli said as they reached the stone steps by the college lawn and sat down together.

“I also don’t like to meddle, but at least you could talk to your mother in a situation like this,” Sarah urged gently.

“Ammi will kill me if I even mention her name,” Nazli said, half in fear, half in frustration.

“Then how will this issue be resolved?” Sarah asked, her curiosity genuine.

“I don’t know. That’s why I’m so worried,” Nazli confessed helplessly.

“Don’t let your parents reject her, otherwise your brother might start living separately with his wife,” Sarah warned, hoping to shake Nazli out of her hesitation.

“God forbid. I don’t want any more trouble in this matter,” Nazli said quickly, almost defensively.

“You can’t stop outcomes. Every event has consequences,” Sarah replied, pragmatic and unbothered.

“Pray, Sarah—please pray it turns out fine,” Nazli pleaded softly. Sarah reached out, laid her hand over Nazli’s, and gave a small, reassuring smile.

✦✦✦

Following Amir’s instructions, Anita locked the room after he left, and he rode off to Javaid’s shop by noon. The sun was high, the air sharp with the scent of dust and heat.

Inside the shop, Amir spoke with a quiet desperation, trying to make his father understand Anita's situation. He knew Javaid's heart would eventually soften — it always did.

Javaid listened with furrowed brows, reprimanding him for such an impulsive act, though his tone betrayed concern more than anger.

"Don't you think her father will make a huge fuss when he hears of this?" Javaid asked at last.

"Baba, believe me, Farida will be glad she's rid of Anita. She'll convince Ikram that what happened is for the best," Amir replied earnestly.

"Still, you shouldn't have done it," Javaid said, shaking his head slowly.

"I had no choice. Her stepmother was about to marry her off in half a week," Amir explained, his voice breaking with sincerity.

"If you had waited, we could have taken a better, honourable proposal," Javaid said, his tone calmer now, though still disapproving.

"Please accept Anita. She's a very good girl; she'll be respectful," Amir pleaded, reading his father's expression carefully.

"You mustn't disrespect your mother in front of her. How will she respect your mother then?" Javaid said sternly, his fatherly authority returning.

"Baba, Ammi goes too far sometimes," Amir admitted, embarrassed by his own words.

"But she is still your mother; she has a right to speak," Javaid replied firmly.

"I'll beg Ammi for forgiveness. I'll do anything. Please, you get Ammi to accept Anita," Amir implored, his hands folded in desperation.

Javaid studied him for a long while. Beneath his composed exterior lay a father's tenderness — love for a son who, despite his flaws, was still his heart's weakness.

"But first tell Anita to inform her father about the marriage," Javaid finally said. Amir's face lit up faintly, and he smiled helplessly before hugging his father.

"Don't worry, Baba," he promised softly.

Back home, Amir asked Anita to call her father. What followed was exactly what she had dreaded. Despite her trembling voice and repeated pleas, Ikram swore never to

see her again. “You’re dead to me,” he said bitterly, before ending the call. Anita’s hands trembled as she redialled, but the phone only rang unanswered.

Farida had achieved her victory — she had succeeded in poisoning Ikram’s heart against his own daughter.

Javaid’s persuasion and, eventually, Roshan Ara’s reluctant forgiveness led to an uneasy truce. Anita was allowed to stay in the house, outwardly as a member of the family, though the acceptance was hollow. Her life became that of a tolerated presence, not a cherished one.

She tried calling her father often, but he had truly turned his back on her. Farida, ever cunning, continued to feed Ikram’s resentment and remind him of Anita’s “disgrace.”

Meanwhile, Amir quietly indulged her — taking her out, buying her small luxuries, trying to shield her from the chill inside their home. Gradually, Nazli and Sana softened. They began to treat Anita with polite normalcy, while Anita, gentle and eager, tried to win everyone’s affection. But Roshan Ara’s heart remained locked in bitterness.

Still, Amir and Anita lived with a private happiness. He often took her shopping, or brought garlands home just to make her smile. Four months slipped by like this, and Nazli — who had watched it all from the periphery — reached one uneasy conclusion: love, however reckless, was powerful. True lovers, she thought, survived every storm.

✦✦✦✦

Zain sped down the highway, loud music blaring through the car speakers as he cut across lanes with reckless precision. The sky burned gold in the late afternoon, and the wind tore through his hair. His friends whooped beside him — another night of indulgence awaited. They were on their way to a private resort, a “special arrangement” for his friend Jahanzeb’s birthday. For Zain, parties like these were routine; his life was an unending rhythm of noise, laughter, and fleeting thrill. Arsalan, his cousin, sat quietly in the backseat. Though he sometimes joined them, guilt was always his shadow — silent, persistent. They turned off the main highway onto a narrow, uneven road that led through open fields. Soon, the tall walls of Jahanzeb’s expansive resort came into view. They stopped before the grand iron gate, honking twice. A pale young employee — hardly more than twenty — rushed out, peered into the car, then darted back to open the gate fully. The vehicle rolled inside. Staff members hurried to unload the luggage — except for one black bag that Zain himself carried, the one holding the “valuable” things. They settled on the lawn near the pool.

The air was fragrant with the scent of barbecue coals as the staff prepared dinner on Jahanzeb's orders. Laughter rippled through the group; the clinking of beer cans mingled with bursts of music and careless jokes. By midnight, their laughter had turned into loud, uninhibited shouting.

Later, they moved to the outdoor dining area where steaming skewers awaited. They ate greedily, then drifted inside to a vast master bedroom. It was two in the morning now, and the music thundered against the walls. One by one, they gave in to intoxication — smoke, liquor, and powders that blurred reality into colour and sound.

Zain felt weightless, suspended in the haze. The lights became halos; the air, a trembling pulse. Then — darkness. His vision began to cloud. He rubbed his eyes, but the haze thickened. The room swayed. He fell to his knees, then slowly onto the floor. Shapes blurred and dissolved around him. The song in the background began to drift through him like a dream:

"Is there anybody in there?
Just nod if you can hear me.
Is there anyone at home?"

✦✦✦

Something pressed against his chest — heavy, alive, almost suffocating. It felt as though a creature had crept onto him, crouching, its weight unbearable. He tried to move, but his body wouldn't obey. Beneath him, the surface was damp — was it grass? His breath hitched. That creature began to scratch, clawing faintly at his chest. He tried to lift his arm, to shove it away, but his strength failed. Someone — or something — pushed him, rolling him onto his side. A strange humming sound filled the silence.

The humming stopped. For a moment, everything was still. Then it began again — a faint crawling sensation across his chest. He forced himself to move, summoning every ounce of energy left. He wanted to open his eyes, to see. But the light seared through his eyelids like needles. He shut them again instantly. The humming resumed, then again, the crawling began. He swung his hand weakly in defence, striking at the invisible weight. It felt hard — like stone — yet it did not stop. He tried again, and again. Gradually, his vision began to return. The light still stabbed, but the pain was duller now. When he opened his eyes fully, realization struck him: he wasn't lying on wet grass at all.

He was on a bed.

And there was no creature on his chest — only his cell phone, vibrating wildly with its ringing tone.

He drew in a deep, shaky breath, memory flooding back. He had fallen asleep at the resort.

The screen flashed — it was his home number. Probably one of the servants. He answered, voice hoarse.

“Hello.”

“Hello, Zain Sahib! The boss has asked you to go to City Hospital immediately!” came the panicked voice of a servant.

“Is everything all right? Why?” Zain asked, glancing around the dim room, searching for a clock.

“Sir, Madam Riffat’s car met with an accident this morning. Sir and Madam tried calling you many times, but you didn’t pick up. So they gave me this duty — to keep calling you,” the servant blurted out in a single breath.

At the word *accident*, Zain’s body went rigid. He sat upright at once.

“Is everyone okay? There’s no danger, right?” he demanded, fear creeping into his voice.

“Sir, I don’t know all that. Mr. Afzal just called me to ask if I had reached you. I told him — it’s been from eleven in the morning till four in the evening but…”

Zain cut him off. “Okay, hang up.” He ended the call, his pulse hammering.

He dialled Afzal’s number immediately — twenty-two missed calls glared back at him.

“Dad!” he said when the line connected, struggling to keep his voice steady.

“Zain, where are you? Get to the hospital right now. Your aunt’s had an accident,” Afzal said tersely and hung up before Zain could reply. He didn’t need more details; the tone said enough.

Zain leapt to his feet and began shaking his friends awake. The night’s haze was gone — only urgency remained.

✦✦✦

Sarah instructed the driver to head straight for City Hospital, and the three of them settled onto the back seat. Upon arrival, Nazli and Sarah helped Falak out of the car and hurried toward the emergency ward, supporting her carefully between them. Inside, they searched the bustling room with anxious eyes. Falak had slipped on the college stairs and fallen badly, injuring her wrist. Judging by the swelling and the intensity of her pain, it seemed the bone might have fractured. Seeing her agony, Sarah had not waited for a car from home — she had immediately brought Falak to the nearest hospital herself. Falak's mother and sister were already on their way there from home.

✦✦✦✦

After waking his friends, Zain's first instinct was to restore his appearance. He rushed straight into the washroom, scrubbing his teeth with fierce determination; he couldn't allow Afzal to read last night's story on his face. After a long shower, he tried to feel fresh again, though every limb ached and his head throbbed with a dull heaviness. When he emerged, his friends still sat half-dazed, reeking faintly of intoxication. Zain cursed them fluently in English until at last he found his car keys. With effort, he started the car and drove out of the resort. Considering the urgency of the situation, he pressed the accelerator — the vehicle roared onto the highway, speeding toward the city.

Midway, Huma's name flashed on the phone screen. Her voice was sharp with anger. "I just don't understand where your phone was!" she shouted.

"Mom, it was on silent," Zain lied smoothly, his voice laced with fatigue.

"You know how attached your father is to his sister — and how worried he is right now. He needs you, Zain," Huma said, her tone trembling with anxiety. She was already at the hospital.

"I'm on my way, Mom — almost there," Zain assured her, his own worry deepening.

"Don't waste another minute," Huma said urgently.

"Okay," Zain replied and ended the call, pressing harder on the accelerator.

✦✦✦✦

After handing Falak over to her mother, Nazli and Sarah went to the reception desk to inquire about the doctor. Once the appointment was arranged, Falak's mother took her for an X-ray of the injured wrist. Sarah's driver had gone back home for an errand,

and since no bus passed conveniently near Nazli's neighbourhood, Sarah decided to drop her friend home herself.

The two girls sat in the emergency waiting area, chatting softly as they waited for the driver to return.

Meanwhile, several of Zain's relatives were also in that same waiting hall. His aunt, Riffat, had been in a minor road accident earlier that morning. Her car had collided with another vehicle and then crashed into a roadside pole. She had suffered a cut on her forehead, which the doctors had stitched and dressed, and they were now tending to minor bruises.

Afzal, however, remained visibly shaken by his sister's mishap. He stood surrounded by relatives, speaking quietly in the waiting area.

A little later, he looked up — and saw Zain entering through the main door.

Dressed in a black shirt and grey jeans, Zain cut a striking figure. He spotted his father from across the hall and walked straight toward him.

"Hello, Dad!" Zain greeted warmly, then moved around to greet other family members. It was not the time for explanations — his mere presence brought visible relief to all.

Huma, seeing him, hurried over immediately. Zain listened as she briefed him on the details of the accident, then crossed over to where Arsalan stood waiting. The two cousins spoke for a while in low tones.

But as Zain turned away from Arsalan, his eyes suddenly caught sight of something — or rather, someone. Nazli sat on one of the benches with Sarah, her face illuminated by the harsh white hospital lights. She was laughing softly at something Sarah had said, her posture relaxed, her shawl slipping slightly from her shoulders.

Zain's steps slowed.

For a moment, the world around him dimmed — as though the remnants of last night's intoxication had returned, flooding his veins. His gaze fixed upon her; everything else vanished into a blur. Nazli wore her college uniform: a crisp white shalwar kameez with a black shawl. Zain thought he had never seen such serene beauty. He wanted to know two things: who she was — and where she had come from. The second mattered little; the first, immensely. Wherever she had come from, her presence in that moment felt like grace itself.

Some faces, he thought, are not encounters — they are gifts. Gifts one fears to lose.

Nazli, of course, had no inkling that someone's eyes followed her every movement. Zain's trance broke when one of his cousins called him from behind. He blinked, collected himself, and turned away. Yet the image of her face clung to his mind, refusing to dissolve. He did not tell Arsalan what had just stirred within him. The two of them stepped out of the ward into the corridor. Zain's thoughts, however, remained fixed — replaying the same face over and over like a reel of light and shadow.

Arsalan spoke beside him, but Zain barely heard a word. After standing outside for a while, they returned to the waiting area to rejoin the family. Soon came the news that Riffat would be discharged that evening. There was no serious danger, only shock. Relief washed over everyone.

It was about seven o'clock. Falak, too, had been treated; her minor fracture had been bandaged, and she had already gone home. Sarah's driver, however, was still nowhere to be found. Nazli grew increasingly anxious. Though she had phoned home to explain, she knew her mother would still be furious at her late return.

Afzal and Huma had left earlier, but Zain deliberately lingered — unwilling to leave before Nazli did. He and Arsalan sat in the hospital cafeteria, nursing cups of coffee.

Zain's thoughts, though, were miles away.

"Who were those two girls in uniform?" he asked, his eyes still distant.

"Where?" Arsalan replied, half-distracted, watching the crowd.

"But what's the pretty one's name?" Zain pressed, ignoring his cousin's indifference.

Arsalan frowned. "What do you mean — which two girls?"

"You didn't notice them in the waiting area? From the uniform, I can guess which college she attends."

"I didn't notice — and honestly, this isn't the time for that," Arsalan said, smirking.

"If you don't know, then I'll have to ask her myself," Zain said with quiet resolve.

"Are you out of your mind? We should be going home. We were worried about Aunt, and here you are—" Arsalan threw up his hands.

"All right, you stay here and worry. I'm leaving," Zain interrupted, draining his cup, setting it down with finality.

He picked up his phone and walked out. Arsalan stared after him, open-mouthed.

✦✦✦✦

“Sarah, where’s your driver? My mother’s called so many times — I must go home,” Nazli said, her voice edged with worry. The two of them sat alone in the waiting area now; the crowd had thinned.

“He dropped my parents somewhere. I’ve called him — traffic’s bad. He’ll come back after dropping them off. Half an hour, maybe,” Sarah said, trying to reassure her.

“Half an hour is too late. Mom’s furious already. You don’t know what it means for my family if I’m out after seven,” Nazli muttered, checking her phone again, her brows furrowed.

“Call Falak; she can send her driver to drop you,” Sarah offered.

“No — no, I don’t want to trouble her,” Nazli replied firmly. She stood, adjusted her shawl over her head, and picked up her bag.

“I’m going home,” she said decisively.

“How will you get there?” Sarah asked, rising as well.

“By rickshaw,” Nazli answered.

“Wait a little — the driver will be back soon.”

“No, I’ve waited for your driver since six. I’m not staying later only to be scolded. My house isn’t far.” She gave Sarah a quick hug. “Take care — see you tomorrow.”

Nazli walked through the emergency waiting area, her eyes fixed on the hospital’s main entrance. The corridor ahead gleamed under the dim fluorescent light. Just as she reached the exit, the door opened — and Zain walked in. Nazli glanced at him once, then turned her gaze away. But Zain’s eyes followed her instantly. Something about her presence seemed to stop time. The shawl over her head framed her face so gracefully that he felt the breath catch in his throat.

A few steps later, they crossed paths.

Nazli opened the corridor door and hurried toward the main entrance. This wing of the hospital was quieter now; visiting hours had ended, and the crowd had thinned. She knew she would find a rickshaw easily once she stepped outside. Her thoughts were on home — on her parents, on Falak, on the small, relentless worries that awaited her there.

Then she heard a voice behind her.

“Excuse me, Miss!”

She slowed and turned, startled. It was Zain, standing only a few paces away.

“Yes?” she said cautiously, trying to understand why he had called her.

“I’m Zain,” he said, smiling.

“Yes,” Nazli replied, still surprised — half expecting him to explain himself.

“May I know your name?” Zain asked, his smile unwavering.

“Nazli.” Her heart quickened. She had no idea what this encounter meant or where it was leading. Yet she answered instinctively, because in that sterile, fluorescent-lit corridor, such an exchange seemed harmless — even natural. Had he not smiled, she might have feared bad news.

“Has anyone told you—” Zain took a step closer, his gaze steady— “you have got the most beautiful face in this world.”

“Uh…” This time her “yes” faltered, caught somewhere between surprise and disbelief.

Zain chuckled softly. “You’re very beautiful,” he repeated.

Nazli said nothing; her silence only emboldened him.

“I’m in a hurry,” she said finally, deciding to end this strange conversation.

“Go — but you’ll come again, won’t you?” Zain asked, almost playfully.

“Why would I come here again?” Nazli asked, blinking at him in confusion.

Zain’s smile deepened. “If you come tomorrow to Coffee Café at the Mall to meet me, I’ll take it that you accept my friendship.” For the first time, Nazli sensed the seriousness behind his teasing tone.

She turned to leave, but before she could take a full step, he added quietly, “I’ll wait for you.”

There was something in his voice — calm, confident, truthful — that rooted her momentarily in place. Then, as though releasing her, he gave a small nod. Nazli looked at him one last time — really looked — and saw that he was indeed handsome, his smile more captivating than his face. She hurried toward the rickshaw stand, her pulse fluttering strangely. Yet when she climbed into the rickshaw, the rumble of its engine and the roar of the traffic seemed distant, muffled. Only Zain’s words echoed in her ears, over and over again:

“You have got the most beautiful face in this world.” “You’re very beautiful.”

Then another voice — faint but familiar — surfaced in her memory:

“Best face of the year award goes to Nazli.”

She couldn’t remember where she had heard it before. Now both voices — Zain’s gentle, admiring tone and that distant, ghostlike echo — merged with the rickshaw’s clamour and filled her mind.

“You’re very beautiful.” “Best face of the year award goes to Nazli.”

✦✦✦✦

He timidly peered from beneath his blanket. The voices he now recalled were the ones that had frightened him since he was six—his parents’ fights and his mother’s weeping that followed. For some time his parents’ quarrels had been frequent. At six he could not understand the reasons but was sure his father was to blame. How that certainty grew inside the child, no one could say—his mother had told him stories of his father’s cruelty while his father never told his side. A small child could not fully grasp such things, yet the feeling rooted in him that his father hurt his mother. His mother’s constant crying reinforced the idea that his innocent mother bore injustice. The daily fights shaped a complex cluster of feelings in him—fear, helplessness, pity, hatred, loneliness—feelings that lived in him whenever his mother’s sobs and his father’s harsh words struck his ears. He wanted the noise to stop; sometimes it did after his father left the house, but for hours it persisted. Afterward his mother would cry or phone a confidante and pour out her pain; during that time the boy would stay close, play with his toys, or watch cartoons. He wished someone would come to help—but no one did. Perhaps his mother never told anyone all the details; if she had, help might have come. He couldn’t tell his mother about the turmoil in his little chest. He didn’t understand how deeply those arguments affected him—he simply lay still, frightened, until his mother returned to normal and his little mind relaxed, forgetting everything until the next recurrence. No one knew that those accumulated feelings would one day form the foundation of his whole personality.

After lying still for some time listening to the quarrel, he got out of bed, stood in the corridor outside their bedroom. He didn’t know what his father was saying or why his mother cried; he only knew it was terrible—terribly frightening, like a ghost from a horror story. He stood there trembling until tears flowed from his eyes, and the sound of them matched the rhythm of his mother’s sobbing.

✦✦✦✦

“Which way, sister?” the rickshaw driver asked, breaking her reverie.

Nazli stared blankly out at the road; cars rushed past on her right, but she heard nothing.

“Which way now, sister?” he repeated more loudly. Startled, she blinked and came back to herself. She looked around, momentarily lost, then recognized where they were.

“Why did you stop here?” she asked curtly.

“I’m asking where to go now — what’s your destination?” the driver retorted.

“Oh — go straight from here, then take a left at Super Bakery,” she replied quickly.

Her phone vibrated in her bag. She fumbled it out — a call from home.

“Do you know how many times we called you in the last half hour?” came Roshan Ara’s furious voice the moment she answered.

“Yes, I’m reaching in just five minutes. The phone was inside my bag, and I was in the rickshaw, so I couldn’t hear the bell sound,”

Nazli reassured her mother. She already knew that once she reached home, a storm of commotion would be waiting for her — yet, strangely enough, today she felt no trace of anxiety. It was as though she were drifting through another world, as though someone had breathed a new soul into her body. She was being introduced to a feeling entirely unfamiliar to her — something inexplicably sweet and deeply stirring. Whatever it was, that strange sensation made everything around her shimmer with a certain enchantment. Under ordinary circumstances, she would have been tormented by the thought of returning home late and the uproar that would inevitably follow.

But tonight, none of that seemed to matter.

Her heart and mind were suspended in a single image — the event of the day — replaying like the trailer of a film on the screen of her memory. The more she thought about it, the more she felt a tender, thrilling current awaken somewhere deep within her. What was this feeling — this first stirring of something unnamed? She did not know what one was supposed to do in such a state, nor how one should contain it. For several minutes, the rickshaw circled through narrow lanes according to her direction and finally stopped outside her house. There was no need to ring the bell. Right at the gate stood her elder brother, Amir, ready to perform his usual duty — delivering a stern lecture before she even crossed the threshold. Javaid had not yet

returned from his shop, so she knew that no one would be there to silence Roshan Ara tonight.

“So you’ve come! Do you have any shame or modesty in you?”

Roshan Ara’s sharp voice struck the air — angry in tone and blazing in her eyes.

She was sitting in the TV lounge, busy slicing fruit, repeating for the thousandth time those familiar words of reproach. “As if the troubles in my life are not already enough, you still find ways to give me some new distress every single day!”

Her voice swelled with habitual self-pity.

“Where had you gone, finally?” Amir’s voice followed hers, firm and interrogative.

“My friend Falak fell at college, so Sara and I took her to the hospital for a plaster — in Sara’s car,” Nazli replied calmly.

“Seems she dropped you home too, after setting her bones,” Roshan Ara shot back bitterly, venting the grievances that forever crowded her heart.

Nazli did not answer.

She offered no defence, no explanation — she simply turned away and walked silently toward her room.

“It’s the leniency you’ve shown her that’s made her so careless,” Amir said, glaring after her.

“Yes, everything and everyone in this house is spoiled because of me! Whatever you did — that too was because of my leniency, wasn’t it?” Roshan Ara’s verbal cannon swivelled instantly toward him. Whatever the topic, she found a way to link it to his marriage.

“Look, Ammi, now don’t take out all your anger on me,” Amir said irritably, reading his mother’s intention.

“Why wouldn’t I be angry? As if you’ve ever cared about my anger or my displeasure! You were always so mindful of it — weren’t you?” Her sarcasm cut like a whip.

“I don’t understand how long I must keep listening to these taunts and jibes,” Amir said in a weary voice.

“For you, your parents’ words have always sounded like taunts and jibes —that’s why, till today, you’ve achieved nothing in life except one love marriage!” Roshan Ara had found her moment.

“Oh God, Ammi!” Amir exclaimed, clutching his head in frustration. He knew those words would wound Anita as well.

In her room, Anita — who had been watching television at full volume — hurriedly turned it off, startled by the quarrel.

“What are the other people doing that I’m not?” Amir shouted angrily, throwing his hands up.

“Boys of your age study and make something of themselves — they don’t go and fall in love and get married at twenty-two!” Roshan Ara replied loudly, her eyes flashing.

“Well, I’ve done it now! Should I die for it?” Amir snapped.

“Why would you die? You’ve already killed us!” Roshan Ara’s voice rose to a shriek.

“It’s useless to talk to you,” Amir said finally, drained of strength.

“Then don’t talk! Don’t! Anyway, you’re too busy sitting at your wife’s feet to have any time left.” Roshan Ara’s fury flared anew.

Amir stamped his foot and strode toward his room. Even from within Nazli’s room, their voices reached distinctly, and she had never imagined the argument would stretch so far.

Since her brother’s marriage, her mother had never managed to forgive the disappointment of his defiance. And now, with the family’s worsening financial troubles, everyone had grown irritable and short-tempered. Nazli’s younger siblings, Sharmeen and Ameen, often faced delays in their school fees. Meanwhile, pressure from Sana’s in-laws to fix the wedding date had left Roshan Ara restless and constantly anxious. She vented her stress by scolding her children over the smallest things. It was not so much her son’s faults that hurt her as the fact that he had married by his own choice. She had never reconciled herself to Anita, for whom married life had turned into a daily soap opera of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law quarrels — whereas before marriage, that same life had seemed to her a glittering Bollywood love story. On the other side, Anita’s father, Ikram, still had not forgiven her, and she often grew sorrowful whenever she remembered him.

“See, Nazli, this is the result of coming home late!” Sana burst out as soon as she entered the room, annoyed by the chaos that still echoed through the house.

“I didn’t get late intentionally. Sara’s driver came late, and then you know I came alone in a rickshaw so that there wouldn’t be any issue at home,” Nazli said in her defense — for the first time that evening, she felt like the guilty one. For a while longer, the

bitter voices of her mother and brother continued to fill the house. But when Javaid returned from his shop, silence gradually settled.

Nazli did not eat dinner that night, and no one asked her to. Lying on her bed, she drifted back into thought, reliving the day's events again and again. Zain's face and words returned to her mind — uninvited, unshakable. Her thoughts ran endlessly. No one had ever praised her so openly before — or perhaps she had never given anyone the chance. And now, suddenly, this had happened. She had never spoken so freely with any boy from her family, and no boy at college had ever dared approach her, though she often felt many eyes following her. But no one had ever found the courage to speak. Nazli's reserved nature had always set her apart. During class breaks, she could usually be found in the library, her mind too occupied with her home's problems and the weight of the future to think beyond them.

"If you come to meet me tomorrow at Coffee Café at the Mall, then I will take it that you have accepted my friendship."

Suddenly, she remembered those words — Zain's voice, carrying that heart-piercing tone, still echoed in her mind. The sound of it had sunk deep into her heart. But looking at the state of her home now, she could not even imagine going anywhere tomorrow.

"What is this — that just by hearing a little praise I lose all sense and start acting upon someone else's wish, without thinking of my own life's constraints and difficulties?" she asked herself, struggling to reason with her emotions. Thinking such thoughts, questioning herself again and again, she didn't realize when sleep overtook her.

Nazli went to college the next morning as usual and attended all her classes. Several times during the day, the thought crossed her mind that perhaps someone was waiting for her somewhere. But each time, she brushed the thought aside. At four in the evening, she left the college to go home.

✦✦✦

Zain, meanwhile, had not yet freed himself from the spell of Nazli's beauty. He was certain she would come to meet him — for his confidence in his own charm was boundless. In his opinion, he possessed the power to attract any girl he chose. Relying on that same conceit, he had proposed friendship to Nazli the very first time they met. As usual, he returned home from college, ate his lunch and began getting ready to go to Dolmen Mall. Today he paid unusual attention to his appearance. He

spent a long while perfecting his hairstyle, then, picking up his car keys, left the house. He was sure that Nazli would already be waiting for him there.

But when he reached Coffee Café, a wave of disappointment swept over him — Nazli was not there.

✦✦✦✦

“Where are we going?” Arsalan asked the next day as Zain steered the car out of the college parking lot. Zain had taken early permission to leave, his manner unusually intent. Arsalan watched him from the passenger seat, suspicious. “Tell me — where exactly are we going?”

“To say hello to Nazli,” Zain replied, his voice even, his eyes hidden behind dark glasses.

“Nazli? Who’s that?” Arsalan asked, genuinely puzzled.

“The girl from the hospital,” Zain said without turning his head.

Arsalan blinked, then laughed incredulously. “You’re crazy!”

“What’s crazy about it?” Zain asked calmly.

“You’re dragging me into your nonsense — this is ridiculous,” Arsalan snapped, looking away.

“This isn’t nonsense,” Zain said, a mischievous glint flickering in his eyes. “It’s a challenge.”

“A challenge?” Arsalan scoffed. “What does that even mean?”

“My offer of friendship has never been rejected,” Zain said coolly. “I told her if she came to meet me, I’d take it as acceptance. She didn’t come — so maybe she’s challenging me.”

Arsalan turned to him, half amused, half exasperated. “So you think she’s thrown down a challenge?”

“Maybe.”

“It still sounds foolish.”

“Think what you like,” Zain shrugged.

“You’ll stand outside her college like some cheap suitor?” Arsalan sneered.

“No time for standing. I’ll talk to her directly.”

“You’ll make a spectacle of that poor girl,” Arsalan warned.

“There’s a way to everything. I won’t make a spectacle,” Zain said, braking gently at a red light.

Arsalan shook his head. He had known Zain for years — known his arrogance, his confidence, his success with girls — but never had he seen him *pursue* anyone. Usually, it was the other way around. Zain had always said that girls who approached first couldn’t be trusted. Yet this time, something had turned the tables. Nazli’s silence had challenged him more than any flirtation could. He decided she must have had a reason for not showing up — some restraint, some innocence. That thought only deepened his fascination.

By early afternoon they reached her college. Zain parked outside and walked toward the main gate, but before they could take a step further, a security guard raised a hand.

“Where are you going?” the guard demanded.

“We need to meet our cousin,” Arsalan said quickly.

“No one’s allowed in. Wait till college is over,” the guard replied.

“We just need to speak for a minute — it’s important,” Zain tried.

“Whatever it is, no entry. You can go to the admin office, leave your ID copy,” the guard pointed toward a small booth nearby. “Or call the person out.”

Zain and Arsalan stepped aside, frustrated.

“What now?” Zain muttered.

“We don’t even know her full name,” Arsalan reminded him.

“Maybe we can give the guard some money,” Zain said, lowering his voice. “He might let us in.”

“He’s a Pathan,” Arsalan hissed. “You’ll get shot for your stunt.”

“Relax,” Zain said lightly, and approached the guard again.

“If you charge a fee, take whatever — just let us in,” he said bluntly.

The guard’s eyes hardened. “No fees. We don’t admit outsiders before four.”

Zain pulled a thousand-rupee note from his wallet and extended it discreetly.

“Don’t insult me!” the guard barked, his tone sharp. Zain slipped the note back into his pocket.

“We don’t know what game this is,” the guard said to his colleague inside the booth as the boys turned away.

“Four hours until four o’clock,” Arsalan muttered, heading back toward the car. “How long do you plan to wait?” Zain followed silently. Once seated, he stared out of the windshield, lost in thought.

“If you met her today,” Arsalan asked, “what would you even say?”

Zain paused. “Nothing special. Just ‘hello’... and maybe get her number.”

“You’ll stop her like some street Romeo,” Arsalan scoffed.

“No,” Zain said, his eyes narrowing slightly.

“You will — mark my words,” Arsalan mocked.

“No,” Zain said again, more quietly. “I’ll do something else.”

A sudden glimmer of confidence crossed his face. “Let’s go home,” he said abruptly, starting the engine. Arsalan stared, bewildered, as Zain gave one last glance toward the college gates and drove off. Back home, Zain immediately powered up his laptop. His fingers flew across the keys — swift, precise, purposeful. Arsalan sat beside him, watching the screen. Zain typed the college’s name into Facebook’s search bar. It took several minutes, but finally, he found her profile. There were no photos of her, only a plain profile picture of flowers. He studied the page carefully, scanning through her limited posts, her list of friends, her groups.

“What are you planning to do with her Facebook?” Arsalan asked.

“A bit of research,” Zain replied absently.

“So, you’ll send a friend request?” Arsalan said. “If she didn’t respond to you in person, why would she accept you online?”

“I won’t send a request,” Zain said flatly.

Arsalan frowned. “Then what will you do?”

“I’ll hack her Facebook account,” Zain said calmly.

Arsalan stared. “Zain, are you out of your mind?”

“I’m not doing anything wrong,” Zain said casually. “Just want to see who she talks to — maybe find her number.”

“There’s a *limit* to obsession,” Arsalan muttered, shaking his head.

Zain ignored him. His hands moved swiftly, code after code. After a few minutes, he leaned back with a small, triumphant smile.

“It’s done. Account hacked.”

Arsalan sighed, exasperated. “That’s like breaking into someone’s house.”

“In love and war, everything is fair,” Zain said with a smirk.

He began scrolling through the messages.

“Seems she’s a decent girl,” he murmured after a while. “No chats with boys. So many requests — she accepted no one.”

“Then she won’t give *you* a chance either,” Arsalan said.

“Time will tell,” Zain said easily, closing the laptop. “But one good thing came out of it.”

“What?”

“I got her phone number,” Zain said, reclining on the bed, satisfaction gleaming in his eyes.

✦✦✦

Nazli finished washing the dishes and went to her room. Sana was already asleep.

“Sana — are you asleep?” she called softly. No answer. Suddenly, her phone buzzed — an unknown number. She hesitated for a moment, then answered.

“Hello?”

“Hello, is this Nazli speaking?” came a calm, unfamiliar voice.

“Yes,” Nazli said, puzzled.

“I’m Zain Afzal. We met at the hospital gate — remember?”

Her hand froze midair. Recognition struck like a jolt.

“How did you get my number…?” she began, startled.

“I hope I didn’t disturb you?” Zain said lightly, ignoring her question.

“No, but… why did you call me? And how did you get my number?” she asked again, more firmly.

“Because there’s something I wanted to say to you,” he replied smoothly.

“Yes?” Nazli said, her tone suddenly guarded.

“Has anyone ever told you,” Zain said softly, “that the word *beautiful* is too small for you? I’ve never been this drawn to anyone before.”

Nazli’s breath caught — and then she ended the call abruptly. She stared at the phone in disbelief. It rang again; she disconnected. Then she switched it off altogether, her heartbeat unsteady.

How did he even get my number? Is he following me? Who is this boy really?

Her thoughts looped endlessly that night, until exhaustion finally silenced them.

The next morning, Nazli stood in the college corridor, her mind restless. The events of the night still clung to her — Zain’s words, his tone, his boldness. She couldn’t shake them off.
When Falak and Sarah joined her, the secret spilled out before she could stop herself.

“Then what happened?” Falak asked eagerly, eyes gleaming with curiosity.

“Then I immediately switched off my phone,” Nazli replied coolly, trying to sound detached.

“You’re unbelievable!” Sarah exclaimed. “You should’ve talked to him — what would it have hurt? And by the way, you didn’t even tell us about your *first* meeting with him until now!”

“Well, now you know,” Nazli said with a sigh. “I’ve never spoken to any boy on the phone before. I don’t even know how you people manage it.”

“Maybe not before,” Sarah teased, “but you just said the guy’s good-looking, well-groomed, and clearly from a decent family — that makes a difference.”

“What does that have to do with me?” Nazli asked, biting her lip.

“Oh, come on, don’t lie to yourself,” Falak said, laughing. “You clearly liked him.”

“Yeah, I think so too,” Sarah agreed. “And anyway, you’ve got his number now, right?”

“I deleted it — as soon as I turned my phone back on,” Nazli said innocently.

“What!” Sarah stared at her in disbelief.

“Unbelievable girl,” Falak shook her head.

“What’s the big deal if I deleted it?” Nazli protested. “No need to make it dramatic.”

“Oh, you’re definitely feeling bad,” Sarah teased, “you’re just pretending not to.”

Falak burst into laughter. Nazli turned her face away, trying to hide the faint smile that had begun to form. But deep inside, something was changing — something she didn’t want to name. Zain’s words — his calm, deliberate admiration — had awakened a sensation she had never known before. Since that night, those lines kept echoing in her mind like a song she couldn’t stop humming.

By evening, she found herself brushing her hair in front of the mirror, lost in thought.

“Nazli!” Sana called from the bed, her eyes still on a book.

Nazli smiled faintly at her reflection, pretending not to hear.

“Nazli!” Sana called again, louder this time.

Nazli blinked and turned. “What is it?” she asked, startled.

“That’s what I want to know,” Sana said, closing her book. “You’re acting weird today. Everything okay?”

“I was just wondering…” Nazli paused, her eyes soft with curiosity.

“Wondering what?” Sana asked.

“Am I… very beautiful?” Nazli said dreamily.

Sana looked up, blinked once, and replied casually, “Never really thought about it.” She went back to her book.

Nazli smiled faintly and turned to the mirror again. Her reflection smiled back — the faintest hint of colour on her cheeks. Zain’s voice whispered in her memory: *“You have the most beautiful face in the world.”* She smiled again — then suddenly grew still. A shadow passed through her expression. She turned away from the mirror, her heart caught somewhere between joy and guilt.

✦✦✦✦

Zain’s class had just ended. He walked out with his friends toward the college ground, his phone already in his hand. He dialled her number. The phone rang. No answer. He tried again. Still nothing.

Meanwhile, in the science lab, Nazli — wearing her white coat — was absorbed in her experiment. Her phone, on silent, vibrated quietly inside her bag. She lifted a flask, noted her observations, focused entirely on the task before her. As always, she completed her practical first — neatly, flawlessly. Even her teacher couldn't help admiring her precision. Soon, her classmates began crowding around her table, asking for help. Falak and Sarah stood nearby, watching her explain the steps with quiet authority.

Outside, leaning against a pillar, Zain called again. And again. Finally, with a sigh of frustration, he slipped the phone into his pocket. As he turned to leave, he saw Sobia walking toward him — tall, confident, her accent polished, her expression bright.

"Hello, Zain!" she greeted, smiling broadly.

"Hi," he said shortly, his tone neutral.

"Are you mad at me or something?" she asked lightly.

"No. Who told you that?" Zain replied, distracted — his thoughts far away, lost in another girl's face.

"Then why are you ignoring me? I've noticed it," Sobia said, her voice half-teasing, half-wounded.

"It's nothing like that," Zain said briefly.

"Come over tonight — to my place," she said suddenly, her voice low, suggestive.

Zain turned to her sharply. "Your place? Why?"

"My parents sleep early. You could come over... you know?" She smiled, stepping closer.

Zain looked at her for a moment, then said quietly, "Sobia, what kind of girl are you? Do you have no self-respect? Most girls wouldn't even answer a boy's call — and you're inviting me over at night?"

Sobia stunned. "You're saying that? You, Zain?" she asked bitterly. "And who are these girls you're talking about — the ones who wouldn't even take a boy's call?"

"Yes, there are such girls," Zain said softly. "And they're better than you."

"Wow. So that's the kind you like," she said sarcastically.

"Why be shocked? Yes, those are the ones I like. And no — I'm not coming. Stop following me," Zain said simply, and walked away.

Sobia stood rooted to the spot, speechless — watching him disappear into the corridor.

✦✦✦✦

Later that day, when Nazli returned from the lab, she saw over twenty missed calls from Zain.

“Just call him and ask what he wants,” Falak urged immediately.

“Yes, do it!” Sarah insisted, eyes glimmering with excitement.

As they crossed the college ground toward their class, Nazli hesitated — then her phone rang again. She glanced at the screen, then at her friends — and answered.

“Nazli!” Zain’s voice came, eager and warm.

“Yes?”

“It’s me, Zain.”

“I know,” she said, her voice calm. “Why are you calling me?”

Falak covered her face with her hands in mock despair.

“Please don’t take me wrong,” Zain said quickly. “I respect you — truly — and I want to be your friend.”

“But why?” Nazli asked, frowning.

“Because… I really like you. Simple.”

Nazli was silent. Sarah and Falak gestured wildly beside her, mouthing what she should say next.

“Won’t you say something?” Zain asked, his voice uncertain now.

“Look, I don’t… befriend boys,” Nazli said finally, her tone soft but firm.

Falak groaned.

“Okay then, not friends — but can we at least talk sometimes?” Zain asked gently.

“My class is about to start. I’ll have to hang up,” Nazli said.

“So, can we talk again sometime?” he pressed quickly.

“If I answer, then sure — we can talk,” Nazli replied after a small pause.

Zain smiled quietly on the other end. Nazli ended the call.

“What will this girl even do with her life!” Falak muttered to Sarah.

“Seriously — a guy this crazy about her, and she’s acting like it’s nothing!” Sarah agreed.

Nazli said nothing. But inside, her pulse was racing.

The phone rang again.

“Hello!” she said.

“Just checking if you’d answer again,” Zain teased.

“You’re quite impatient,” she said, trying not to laugh.

“And stubborn too,” he replied, making her laugh despite herself.

“By the way,” she said, “you still haven’t told me — how did you get my number?”

“I hacked your Facebook account,” Zain said casually.

“What!” Nazli nearly shouted. Falak and Sarah turned to look.

“Yes, really. I just told you the truth,” he said calmly.

“But that’s… that’s not right!” she said, her voice rising.

“I had no other way to reach you,” he said simply.

There was something disarming in his tone — an honesty that melted her anger before it could grow.

“You can change your password now,” Zain added lightly. “I don’t need it anymore.”

“I will,” she murmured.

She had always shut boys down without hesitation — sometimes even changing her number to escape them. But Zain was different. His persistence didn’t feel threatening; it felt… inevitable.

“Anyway, I’ll call you later tonight,” he said.

Nazli didn’t stop him.

That evening, as she told Sarah and Falak everything, the three of them spent the rest of the day teasing her mercilessly. When college ended and they walked toward the gate, Zain’s name came up again.

“I’m sure he really likes you,” Sarah said, smiling.

“Forget it — I’ll miss my bus,” Nazli said, laughing off the conversation.

As they reached the gate, Sarah spotted her car. “Okay, bye!” she said, waving.

Nazli looked around for her bus — and was transfixed.

Zain was sitting in his car, parked across the street, watching her.

She hesitated, then boarded the bus quickly — but she couldn’t resist glancing out the window. The bus started moving, and Zain’s car pulled up alongside, matching its pace perfectly. Nazli couldn’t help smiling faintly. She didn’t admit it to herself, but she liked the attention. Under the soft afternoon light, she thought, *This Zain looks even more handsome than he did in the hospital*.

When his car finally turned away, Nazli felt an unexpected ache — small, quiet, and new.

✦✦✦✦

Sana’s mother-in-law, father-in-law, and sister-in-law arrived that afternoon — their sudden visit after so many days took everyone by surprise. Ordinarily, they came only when Shehzad, their son, visited Pakistan. But appearing unannounced in the middle of the day made Roshan Ara uneasy; such unheralded calls never meant anything simple. When Nazli returned home from college and stepped into the house, she saw her mother seated in the drawing room, conversing with the guests. Roshan Ara was all smiles, her voice light but her eyes alert. Nazli entered quietly, offered formal greetings, and then excused herself with polite restraint.

“I had spoken to Shehzad only a week ago. He said he’d be coming to Pakistan after three or four months.” Roshan Ara smiled as she spoke. Sana, silent and dutiful, was placing a tray of refreshments on the center table.

“Exactly,” said Sana’s mother-in-law, adjusting her dupatta, “and that is why we thought Shehzad and Sana’s wedding date should also be fixed. But in truth, the reason we’ve come today is something else…”

The slight weight in her tone wiped the smile from Roshan Ara’s face.

“Yes, yes, please do say.” Roshan Ara forced a brittle smile, while Sana began to pour tea into the delicate cups.

“We heard that a few months ago your son Amir got married?” The older woman’s words were careful yet unmistakably probing. Roshan Ara’s colour rose and fell in a single breath.

“Who told you this?” For a moment, she was unable to think of any suitable reply.

“Leave that,” said the father-in-law in his deep voice. “Just tell us — is it true or not?” Sana, almost against her will, turned toward her mother.

“Yes, it’s true,” Roshan Ara finally admitted, her voice faint, “but we haven’t told anyone yet.” There was no point in denial — clearly, they had come already knowing the truth.

“But why, sister?” the mother-in-law asked at once. “What could have happened that you hid such a thing?”

“Well… actually, Amir’s *nikah* was performed very simply, and the girl went with him afterward,” Roshan Ara said, trying to keep her composure though the colour had drained from her face.

“Amir’s in-laws too are very simple-natured people…” she added hastily, attempting to smooth the matter.

“But you should have told us. We came to know from here and there.” The mother-in-law’s tone turned faintly reproachful. Sana, meanwhile, handed around the cups of tea.

“You’re right. I was just thinking to tell Sana that she should at least inform Shehzad first,”
Roshan Ara replied, improvising.

“But still — what was the rush that you married your son off so quietly?” Sana’s mother-in-law continued probing.

“Well, the girl’s stepmother was causing quite a scene, so we had to act quickly. We didn’t even get the chance to hold a proper ceremony,” Roshan Ara said, trying to conclude the topic.

“But auntie, people are saying all sorts of things,” Sana’s sister-in-law interjected with self-importance, unwilling to miss her turn in the conversation.

Sana, after placing the last cup, quietly left the room. Her mother sat speechless for a moment, her lips pressed tight. Outside the drawing room, Sana met Nazli — both paused near the door and listened, their hearts uneasy.

“If there is any major matter in Shehzad’s in-laws, we should know of it,” the father-in-law said after a sip of tea. “People are asking us questions while we know nothing.”

“Yes, brother, you’re right,” Roshan Ara murmured, struggling to hide her embarrassment.

“Won’t you introduce us to the daughter-in-law?” the mother-in-law asked suddenly, setting her cup down. She seemed determined not to leave anything incomplete.

“Well… actually, Amir dropped her at her parents’ place this morning,” Roshan Ara lied smoothly, her face tight with effort. “I would have been very happy if you all could have met her.”

After a few more polite exchanges, Sana’s in-laws finally took their leave.

As soon as the door closed behind them, Roshan Ara seized the telephone and called Javaid, narrating everything in a rush. Then, unable to contain herself, she strode straight toward Anita’s room.

Anita sat before the dressing table, brushing her hair. The door flew open — Roshan Ara burst in.

“Because of you, Sana’s in-laws have just left after humiliating us! Remember — if even the shadow of your misfortune falls upon my daughters, I will never forgive you!” Her eyes blazed. Without waiting for a reply, she turned and left.

Tears welled in Anita’s eyes. She covered her mouth with trembling fingers and began to sob. After a few minutes, she told the whole incident to Amir over the phone.

After dinner, Sana and Nazli sat in Roshan Ara’s room, watching television. Javaid kept tapping his wristwatch, lifting it to his ear as if the ticking might return. Roshan Ara, sipping tea, glanced at the screen distractedly.

“Now please, do as I’m saying,” she broke in during the commercial break.

“Until Anita’s father accepts her, I can’t do anything,” Javaid replied dryly.

“You’ll end up ruining Sana’s engagement too with this business. I’ve said it before — my daughters’ lives must not be affected.” Roshan Ara repeated the line she had spoken a dozen times before.

Just then Amir entered. His face was tight with anger.

“Ammi, what was the need to scold Anita?” He didn’t even greet his parents.

“Oh! So now your wife whispers in your ear, and you come to scold your mother?” Roshan Ara shot back sharply, her eyes flashing.

“You left nothing unsaid either! What wrong did that poor girl say to you?” Amir’s voice rose; his restraint broke.

“Poor girl! And what about the one sitting right here?” Roshan Ara pointed toward Sana. “Her engagement is in danger because of your mistakes!”

“Why, what’s happened? Only that my marriage wasn’t mentioned to Sana’s in-laws, right? We don’t ask them to tell us every detail of their affairs either.” Amir’s tone was defiant.

“Amir, speak softly to your mother!” Javaid snapped.

“You care neither for your mother nor for your sisters,” Roshan Ara said bitterly, turning away.

“You should have just said clearly that yes, Amir is married — what’s the problem?” Amir’s voice was loud now.

“I’m not going to have my daughter run away and marry like your wife did, so that I ignore her in-laws’ respect!” Roshan Ara’s sarcasm was cutting.

“Oh, enough, Roshan Ara! Stop it and be quiet. Amir, leave the room.” Javaid’s patience snapped.

“I’m tired of living in this hell!” Amir shouted, stamping his foot, and stormed out.

Nazli and Sana watched, wide-eyed.

“Did you see? Did you see how he talks? He’s become completely henpecked!” Roshan Ara said to Javaid.

“Enough, woman, don’t you ever get tired? All this constant nagging!” Javaid retorted helplessly.

“You always blame me and defend your son!” Roshan Ara shook her head furiously.

Nazli and Sana sat silently, witnesses to yet another domestic battle. Javaid picked up his cap and left the room. Roshan Ara made a face and began muttering under her breath.

“How that girl has completely trapped Amir Bhai,” Sana whispered after Javaid left.

“I can’t believe Amir Bhai could change so much. He doesn’t see anything anymore.” Nazli said softly.

“These modern girls — when they find such donkeys, they only have to whip and drive them,”
Roshan Ara sneered.

✦✦✦✦

Zain was at a snooker club with his friends. The place was styled almost like a beer bar — dim lights, heavy smoke, loud laughter echoing off the walls. The club had three floors, the lowest reserved for those who favoured certain forbidden “drinks.” Contrary to habit, Zain wasn’t downstairs today. He was sitting on the upper floor, watching his friends play while endlessly dialling Nazli’s number.

Her phone, on silent mode, lay inside her cupboard, vibrating uselessly.

After a long while, Nazli entered her room and saw the flood of missed calls. Sana was fast asleep on the bed beside hers. Nazli set the phone down, sat on the bed with a book in her lap, but her mind wandered — to Zain.

Then, again, his name flashed on the screen. After a moment’s hesitation, she picked up.

“Hello!”

“Hello! How are you?” Zain’s voice was bright, cheerful.

“You shouldn’t have come and stood outside my college like that,” Nazli said, serious and low.

“Why? Can’t I even stand there now?” Zain’s tone was teasing.

“Why were you driving your car behind my bus?” Nazli asked quickly.

“Oh, so you were looking at my car?” Zain smiled.

“Yes,” Nazli admitted hesitantly.

“But did anyone else in your bus see my car?”

“Why would anyone say so when no one even knows you?”

“Then that means *you* know me.” Zain’s voice softened with a smile.

“Yes,” Nazli replied nervously.

“Because you’re my good friend — that’s why.” Zain teased.

“But we’re talking for the first time today. How can we already be good friends?” Nazli said, trying to sound reasonable.

“Oh, so you believe friendship needs time to grow. But do you know, people spend lifetimes together and still never understand each other — and sometimes a single moment’s connection outweighs an entire lifetime?” Zain’s voice turned unexpectedly serious.

“I agree,” Nazli said slowly, “but still… what do you actually want?”

“Friendship with you.” His answer was simple, direct.

Nazli thought it wiser not to continue the topic.

“Okay — shall I call you every day at this same time?” Zain asked.

“Will you really call me every day?” Nazli didn’t know herself if she was questioning or marvelling in disbelief. When she realized it, she felt embarrassed.

Zain laughed heartily.

“Yes, of course! That isn’t even something to ask. I want to make this friendship a part of my life — forever.”

The last line carried a depth that startled her. At her age, such words meant the promise of eternity. Sana turned over in her sleep, and Nazli froze, glancing at her.

“I’m hanging up now,” she whispered.

“So hang up. You always cut the call without saying anything — just like the first time.” Flustered, Nazli ended the call. Zain looked at his phone and smiled to himself, then typed a message.

Nazli picked it up almost instantly.

“A real friend is the one who walks in when the rest of the world walks out..!”

She read the line — and smiled.

✦✦✦

Sara, Nazli, and Falak stood near a pillar at college, all three reading Zain’s message on Nazli’s phone. The phone was in Sara’s hand.

“A real friend is the one who walks in when the rest of the world walks out.”

“Wow, excellent!” Sara read it aloud, savouring each word.

“Nazli, just as you’re beautiful, your boyfriend is equally handsome,” Falak teased.

“There’s nothing like that! He’s not my boyfriend, nor am I his girlfriend.” Nazli snatched the phone from Sara’s hand. Just then, it began to ring again.

“Oh, it’s him!” Nazli said in surprise.

“Answer it, silly!” Falak urged.

“Hello!” Nazli spoke softly.

“Where are you right now?” Zain asked without greeting.

“At college… but why?”

“Because I’m also at your college,” he said calmly.

“What?” Nazli exclaimed, looking at her friends in disbelief.

“You must be very excited hearing this. Anyway, I’m waiting for you in the cafeteria — please come.” He ended the call.

“He’s actually come inside the college! He’s saying to come to the cafeteria!” Nazli looked at Sara, alarmed.

“Wow! Then go!” Sara said at once.

“Yes, hurry!” Falak chimed in.

“What’s wrong with you both? The whole college will make a spectacle!” Nazli protested.

“Don’t worry — leave that to us.” Sara grabbed her arm and pushed her forward playfully.

Nazli walked away, heart pounding.

She reached the cafeteria, glancing around nervously. Zain sat at a table, watching her approach.

“This is too much — why have you come here? This is my college; I have some respect here.” Nazli’s voice was low, serious.

“I haven’t come to harm your respect. Please, sit.” Zain smiled.

Nazli sat down. “Say, then.”

“How are you?” he asked.

“You could’ve asked that on the phone.”

“Then I’d have had to make a video call —your face doesn’t show on an ordinary one.” Zain grinned.

“By doing things like this you’re creating trouble for me. I don’t even talk to boys.” Nazli glanced around uneasily.

“I know that — that’s exactly why I’ve come this far,” he said softly.

“What do you mean?”

“I want to be friends with you — and for that, I can go to any extent.” He leaned forward, elbows on the table.

“Don’t you have any friends already that you’re wandering in search of friendship?”

“I don’t have a best friend.”

“So you’ll force people like this?”

“I’m only making a polite request,” he said innocently.

Nazli hid a smile behind her hand.

“You surely won’t regret being my friend.” Zain’s tone was confident.

Nazli hesitated for a few seconds, then smiled faintly.

“I should go now — it’s time for my class.” She stood.

“So, friendship confirmed?” he asked.

“If you promise never to come here again.”

“Okay, that’s my promise. The next meeting will be outside.”

“Please never come here again — that’s my request.”

“Now that the friendship’s confirmed, don’t worry — but I also have one request.” Zain rose from his chair.

“What is it?”

“From today, between us, no more the formalities in our conversation”

“I’ll think about it,” Nazli said with a smile, and walked away.

Zain stood there, smiling to himself as she disappeared down the corridor.

Nazli entered the class a few minutes late. The lecture had already begun. She slipped quietly to her seat in the front row beside Sara and Falak, trying not to draw attention. But her friends immediately began nudging her — their eyes brimming with excitement.

"Tell us everything," Sara scribbled on the corner of her notebook and slid it toward Nazli.
Falak leaned closer, whispering, "What did he say?"

Nazli shook her head lightly, pretending to focus on the lecture. Her cheeks, however, betrayed her — a faint flush lingered there.

When the class ended, the three of them gathered their books and walked toward the gate.
The afternoon sun cast golden stripes through the college courtyard as students poured out, laughing, gossiping, waving their goodbyes.

"So?" Sara pressed. "What else did he say?"

"I've told you everything," Nazli replied, adjusting her bag's strap on her shoulder. "He didn't say anything special."

"I'm sure he's waiting outside the college again today," Falak said confidently.

As they stepped through the gate, Nazli's eyes instinctively began searching — and then she saw him.

Zain.

He was sitting in his car, leaning casually against the door, his dark glasses glinting in the sunlight. The moment he saw her, his lips curved into that same confident smile. Nazli stunned for a second, her heart stumbling. She looked quickly toward her friends.

"See! I told you!" Falak laughed. "All right, my driver's here — I'm off. We'll talk tonight!"
She tapped Nazli's shoulder playfully before leaving.

"I'm going too," Sara said, grinning knowingly.

Nazli, still dazed, gave a shy smile toward Zain's car, then boarded the college bus. She found her usual window seat and sat, her pulse still racing. Moments later, the bus began to move — and so did Zain's car, gliding alongside it. The music from his

speakers floated across the traffic — a slow, romantic tune that made Nazli's breath catch. He had done it deliberately — she knew it. The song felt like a secret conversation between them. Nazli rested her chin on her palm, watching through the window as the car kept pace with the bus. Her lips parted in an involuntary smile. For a while, she forgot everything — the noise of the city, the chaos of the traffic, even the disapproving voices at home. She felt weightless. As if her world had suddenly grown wings. As if every hardship of her life had been momentarily erased by a single glance. And perhaps, in that fleeting moment, it truly had.

✦✦✦

Zain kept his word. Every day thereafter, he called Nazli — without fail. Their conversations began at fixed hours — usually during Nazli's class breaks, the same time she once spent reading quietly in the library with Sara and Falak. Now, her world revolved around those calls. Her tone changed. Her laughter returned. Even her steps grew lighter. People around her began to notice. The first to truly sense the transformation was Anita — her sister-in-law. After Amir, the only person in the house who treated Anita with gentleness was Javaid — or Nazli.

Nazli often went and sat in Anita's room. If anyone in the house, besides Amir, had ever heard the story of Anita's life, it was she. Somewhere deep inside, Nazli had grown to feel genuine sympathy for her. Often, after being scolded by Roshan Ara, Anita would retreat into her room, remember her late mother and father, and cry quietly for hours. Nazli had seen her many times like that — her eyes red, wiping tears with the corner of her dupatta. Because of her affection for Anita, Nazli had often been rebuked by Roshan Ara — yet still, she found moments to talk to her secretly: in the kitchen, on some small pretext, or while passing through another room.

Anita, who had once completed a beautician's course, found quiet solace in adorning Nazli's beautiful face — styling her hair, applying light shades of makeup.

That day, Nazli herself went to Anita's room, brimming with excitement.

"Do it quickly! Before Ammi returns from Khalida Khala's house, I'll wash my face," Nazli said, laughing softly.

"Yes, yes, of course," Anita agreed cheerfully, seating Nazli before the dressing table.

They began chatting while Anita worked.

“Mashallah, Nazli — truly, you don’t even need makeup. God has made you beautiful enough,”
Anita said, carefully applying liner to her large, expressive eyes.

“I never knew before today that I was beautiful,” Nazli murmured, closing her eyes. But behind her eyelids, she saw only one face — Zain’s.

Anita kept working quietly, now styling her hair.

“By the way, Bhabhi, when Amir Bhai first told you about his love, you must not have slept all night, right?” Nazli’s voice sparkled with mischief and innocence.

Anita smiled. “Exactly so.”

“Amir Bhai left the whole world for you. Earlier I couldn’t understand it… but maybe now I can.” Nazli said softly, glancing at herself in the mirror.

“And how have you now understood?” Anita asked curiously.

Nazli faltered for a second. “No, I mean… after knowing you, I can understand.” Her tone betrayed a secret she couldn’t bring herself to say aloud.

Anita smiled faintly and continued fixing her hair.

“Only because of Amir did I learn to love myself,” she said, holding a hairpin between her teeth.

Nazli, lost in thought, smiled too. Anita studied her reflection carefully — every flicker of her eyes, every blush — but she couldn’t quite guess what lay behind it. These days, it was as if Nazli’s life had been lit by an invisible glow. Sara had once said to her, *“The day someone comes who praises you, you’ll forget most of your sorrows.”* And she had been right. Zain praised everything about her — her words, her laughter, her silences. Through his eyes, she saw herself differently for the first time — not as an ordinary girl from an ordinary street, but as someone special, chosen. Their conversations deepened with each passing day. Every morning, Nazli began taking the public bus instead of the college one — just so she could reach an hour early and talk to Zain in peace. At that time, Zain would be driving to his own college, but he, too, never missed the chance to speak to her.

Those were days of celebration in Zain’s house. His stepbrother Nabeel had returned from America to be engaged to his fiancée — also a doctor living abroad. The entire family was busy with preparations for the grand event, which was to be held at a five-star hotel.

In the midst of it all, Zain extended an invitation to Nazli — in person.

“He gave me this card himself at the college gate this morning,” Nazli told Sara, handing her the ornate envelope.

“The card is beautiful. Say thank you to Zain for inviting me,” Sara said, admiring it.

“Zain said I could bring a friend — so I can tell Ammi it’s our classmate’s engagement. You’ll pick me up from home.” Nazli explained, munching on a chip.

“If you don’t want to go, I can go with her,” Falak volunteered with a grin.

“I wish I could take you both,” Nazli said happily.

“I’m sure since it’s at such a high-class hotel, it’ll be a grand function.” Sara handed the card to Falak.

“Yes — but I’m nervous,” Nazli admitted, sitting on the college stairs. “What kind of clothes will I even wear?”

“You’ll have to dress to their standards,” Sara said sensibly.

“Of course — don’t go wrapped in a dupatta!” Falak teased, eyeing her simple outfit.

“Yes, you should look a little modern — fit in with the crowd,” Sara added.

“I’ll do your hairstyle myself,” Sara offered.

“I’ll get it done by Anita Bhabhi — she’ll also do the makeup. Don’t worry,” Nazli replied cheerfully.

“Yes, that’s even better — but make sure it’s stylish. It’s going to be a high-society party,”
Sara said.

“Of course — and choose your clothes after consulting us,” Falak insisted.

Nazli laughed, her heart already fluttering with anticipation.

✦✦✦✦✦

“Please, have a seat,” said the school principal, gesturing toward the chair. “Would you like tea or coffee?”

“No, thank you,” the woman replied softly.

A young teacher seated beside the principal opened a file and placed it before her.

“I asked you here today to discuss your child. But your husband’s presence would have been very important,” said the principal — a composed woman in her mid-forties, adjusting her glasses as she spoke.

“He’s out of town,” the woman lied with practiced grace. No one suspected otherwise.

“I see. We’re quite concerned about your son. He’s one of our brightest students, but his class teacher feels something’s wrong at home.”

The principal’s tone was cautious, her eyes measuring the mother’s expression with delicate precision.

“What do you mean? I don’t understand,” the woman asked, her voice trembling slightly.

The principal glanced at the class teacher beside her, signalling her to continue.

“Well, we’ve noticed that your son isolates himself. He doesn’t mix with other children. Normally he behaves fine, but at times he becomes very withdrawn. He often sits alone and cries, but never says why. We’ve tried talking to him — he just won’t open up.”

The mother listened silently, her heart sinking deeper with every word. She had no idea her child was carrying the weight of her crumbling marriage. At home, he always seemed perfectly normal — never revealing a hint of what lay beneath. She swallowed hard, fighting back tears. No one could be allowed to glimpse her private misery.

She knew, in her heart, that her son’s pain was merely the echo of the daily storms between husband and wife.

“This is shocking to me too. I’ve never seen him like that at home,” she said, forcing composure into her breaking voice.

“He’s also drawn some disturbing pictures in his sketchbook,” the teacher continued gravely. “You’ll be surprised that a six-year-old could draw such things.”

She took out a sheet and placed it before the mother. On it were rough, childish figures — a man, a woman, and a small child between them. The father’s face was monstrous; the mother and child stood together, weeping. Behind them loomed a darkly shaded house, radiating fear.

The mother’s eyes blurred. The truth could no longer be disguised.

“There are more,” said the teacher softly, placing several other drawings before her. Each one told the same silent story.

The mother said nothing. Every image pierced her more deeply than any of her husband’s cruel words or blows.

“This is all… very shocking,” she whispered. “I’ll have to talk to my son.”

“Please do,” said the principal gently. “Give him time, give him love. We don’t want anything to scar his mind.”

A few minutes later, she left the school. Tears streamed uncontrollably down her face. At twenty-seven, she had dreamed of a life filled with light — not one as dark and tragic as her child’s drawings.

✦✦✦✦✦

Nazli and Sarah were sitting on the college lawn, watching Falak take out a dress from her shopping bag.

“You’re wearing this,” Falak said, handing it to her.

“This?” Nazli looked surprised, running her hand over the delicate fabric.

“Yes — I’ve decided. You’ll wear this to Zain’s engagement,” Falak insisted, her eyes sparkling.

“But that’s not necessary. I have my own clothes,” Nazli protested, trying to hand the outfit back.

“Of course you do,” Sarah said, pushing it toward her again, “but you’ll be facing Zain’s family — the elite class. You’ve no idea how high-society that crowd will be.”

“Dress to match their world. And remember, Zain might introduce you to his family — think about that.”

“Exactly,” Falak added eagerly. “This is your chance to impress them!”

“When you marry him, people will envy your luck. Men like him don’t come easy,” Sarah said knowingly.

“Nazli was bound to find someone like that — she’s so beautiful,” Falak said sweetly.

“I’m not thinking that far ahead,” Nazli laughed nervously.

“Then just think short-term — do what I say,” Falak ordered playfully.

“I just hope Mother doesn’t forbid me at the last minute. If she’s in a bad mood…” Nazli sighed.

Just then, her phone rang. She smiled at her friends and walked away to take the call.

“There it is — Zain again,” Sarah said, watching her leave.

Nazli, smiling, spoke softly into her phone, her voice dissolving into the breeze that moved gently through the college grounds.

✦✦✦

Nazli stood before the mirror, adjusting her lipstick. Her reflection glowed with soft radiance.

Sana entered the room after washing the dishes and paralysed in awe.

“Wow! Where did this outfit come from?” she asked, her eyes wide with surprise.

“Falak gave it to me for tonight.”

“It looks expensive — must be from a designer boutique,” Sana said, examining the intricate embroidery.

“Falak and Sarah only wear boutique outfits,” Nazli smiled.

“Nazli, look — my earrings! They’ll match perfectly,” Anita said, handing them to her.

“You’re right, they do,” Sana agreed.

“Thank you, Anita Bhabhi,” Nazli said, putting them on and admiring herself once more in the mirror before draping her dupatta.

“How do I look?” she asked playfully.

“Beautiful — but with such a dress, how could you not?” Anita smiled.

“Oh, so it’s just the dress, not me?” Nazli teased, and they all laughed.

“Mother’s in a good mood today. She won’t stop you,” Sana said.

“I’ve already taken her permission. She knows Sarah’s picking me up,” Nazli replied, and with a quick glance in the mirror, she left the room — heart light, eyes full of dreams.

✦✦✦

The stage at the five-star hotel gleamed beneath crystal chandeliers. Zain’s brother Nabeel stood beside his fiancée, leading her by the hand. She wore a sleeveless gold

top and a crimson sharara — dazzling, sophisticated, perfect for the glittering crowd. The hall was a sea of elegance — perfume, silk, and laughter intermingling in the air. Women shimmered in sleeveless blouses and sequined saris; everywhere were the sons and daughters of privilege, draped in luxury.

Afzal and Huma greeted guests with polished smiles, their charm a practiced art. Zain stood nearby, laughing with Arsalan and a group of friends. Three fashionable girls — draped in designer gowns — lingered close, their eyes bright with calculation. Zain kept checking his phone, dialling again and again — but Nazli didn't answer. Frustrated, he sighed and slipped it back into his pocket.

"What's wrong, Zain? You look restless — waiting for someone special?" one of the girls teased.

"He's expecting a very special friend," Arsalan smirked.

Zain shot him a glare.

"And who might this friend be? We've never heard of her," another girl asked with false sweetness.

"You'll see when she arrives," Zain said — and then stunned mid-sentence.

At the entrance stood Sarah, followed by Nazli.

Her dupatta hung loosely around her neck, her hair styled elegantly, her face softly luminous with makeup — even more beautiful than he had imagined. Amidst all the glittering women, Nazli stood apart — radiant in her simplicity. Zain's gaze locked onto her. For a moment, he was utterly spellbound. His friends followed his eyes and fell silent.

Nazli met his gaze and smiled shyly. Zain walked straight toward her.

"You're here! I've been waiting so long," he said, greeting both her and Sarah.

"Traffic jam," Nazli replied politely.

"No problem, come on."

He led them to a table he had reserved.

"You look stunning," he said before leaving to greet another guest.

Nazli smiled faintly — that was exactly what she had hoped to hear.

A waiter soon appeared, serving cocktails and juice.

“Nazli, this function is even grander than I imagined,” Sarah whispered, gazing around in awe.

“Almost everyone here’s in sleeveless outfits. We’re the only ones overdressed,” Nazli murmured, scanning the glittering hall.

“You’re so lucky. You’ll marry into such a rich family,” Sarah said with a grin.

“Sarah, Zain’s not arranging any marriage — his parents are. They don’t even know I exist,” Nazli said quietly, her tone subdued.

Just then, Zain returned — this time with his friends, including the same three girls.

“Please meet my friend Nazli, and her friend Sarah,” Zain said politely.

“And these are Anabia, Sehrish, and Sameera,” he added. “And you already know Arsalan — this is Talha and Umair.”

“Zain, you never mentioned Nazli before,” Anabia said in her American accent, her smile thin with jealousy. She had been trying to win his attention for months — and now hated what she saw.

“Some people,” Zain said smoothly, looking at Nazli, “are worth mentioning only on special occasions.”

“Zain’s been waiting for you for ages,” Sehrish said pleasantly.

“Traffic delayed us,” Nazli replied softly.

“Where do you live, Nazli?” Anabia asked, her tone edged with mockery.

“Sarah lives in Defence — I live in Nazimabad.”

“Nazimabad? I wonder where that is?” Anabia said with feigned ignorance, glancing at Zain.

“It’s in Karachi, Anabia. You’ve just never been there,” Zain replied coolly.

“I suppose not,” she said with a sarcastic smile.

“Nazli, I’ll introduce you to my parents in a bit,” Zain said with a reassuring smile before walking away.

His friends watched, whispering behind him.

“Where did Zain pick up this Nazimabadi piece from?” Anabia muttered.

“She’s pretty — and you know how weak Zain is for beauty,” Sehrish replied.

“Did you see what she’s wearing? No class at all,” Sameera sneered.

“Tch tch tch… You girls can be as jealous as you like — but Zain thinks about her day and night,” Arsalan teased.

“Oh please. We have better options to be jealous of,” Anabia shot back.

“Well, Zain didn’t invite any of his exes tonight — only her,” Umair remarked dryly.

“Fine then,” Anabia smirked. “If he couldn’t find anyone in the U.S. or U.K. to love — Nazimabad will do.”

The three girls burst into laughter.

Zain took Nazli to the stage to introduce her to Nabeel and Mehwish. Both bride and groom greeted her with polite courtesy as Zain spoke their names. From afar, his friends’ curious eyes followed every movement on that stage, whispering among themselves.

“Where are Mom and Dad? I wanted you to meet them too. Anyway, come with me,” Zain said, glancing about. Nazli followed him, her heart fluttering with nervous excitement.
They stopped at a quiet corner away from the crowd’s glitter and noise.

“If you hadn’t come today, I would’ve been really hurt,” Zain said softly.

“That’s exactly why I came,” Nazli replied with a gentle smile.

“I brought you here so we can take some selfies together.” Zain pulled his phone from his coat pocket and began clicking pictures, adjusting the angle again and again. Nazli smiled awkwardly, slightly tense each time his hand brushed her shoulder. He clicked several shots; she kept her composure, though her pulse quickened with every flash.

After dinner, Nazli and Sarah left.

Zain had even instructed a waiter to serve them personally. Throughout the function, his eyes returned again and again to Nazli, though he never found the right moment to take her to Afzal and Huma. On the drive home, Sarah spoke endlessly about Zain’s family — their wealth, their glamour, the grandeur of the hotel. Nazli, silent beside her, stared out the window, lost in thought. When Sarah dropped her at home, Nazli thanked her quietly and went inside.

Sana lay on her bed reading a book. Nazli stood before the mirror, gazing at her reflection for what felt like eternity. Sana lowered the book from her face and looked up.

“So, how was your friend’s engagement?” she asked.

Nazli started; she had been far away in thought. “It was quite nice,” she said after a pause, sitting down on the bed.

“You’ve seemed distracted ever since you got back,” Sana remarked.

“Sana, the people I saw today — they were so rich,” Nazli murmured.

“So?” Sana asked simply.

“I don’t know… for the first time, I felt so small.”

“Money doesn’t make someone big or small, Nazli.” Sana turned another page.

“That’s what I used to think too,” Nazli whispered, “but today, I really did feel small.”

“Did anyone say something to you there?”

“No, no one said anything… but there was such a huge difference between them and us.”

“You’re not marrying anyone there, so why think so much about it?” Sana said indifferently.

Nazli lay back on the bed, her face shadowed by sadness. Her phone chimed. She picked it up instantly. Zain had sent her the selfies they had taken together. One by one she looked at them, her expression softening into a faint, wistful smile.

The next day at college, Nazli was unusually quiet.

“So Zain turned out to be from an even richer family than we thought,” Sarah said to Falak as they listened to Nazli describe Nabeel’s engagement. “I’m totally impressed. Honestly, I envy Nazli’s luck,” Sarah said, still thrilled by the event.

Nazli didn’t respond.

“What’s wrong, Nazli? Why so silent?” Falak asked.

“I felt… afraid,” Nazli said slowly.

“Afraid of what?” Sarah asked, surprised.

“Sarah, there’s absolutely nothing common between Zain’s family and mine — the difference is like earth and sky.”

“But Zain knows that and still likes you,” Sarah replied quickly.

“That’s just it,” Nazli said, her voice low. “It’s only Zain who likes me — not his family.”

“His family will have their opinions when the time comes,” Falak reasoned. “It’s not like they’d announce it at his brother’s engagement.”

“Even if they object, Zain will convince them,” Sarah added encouragingly. “Remember how your brother stood up for your sister-in-law? It’s always the man who must handle such situations.”

Nazli looked at her, uncertain yet hopeful.

“If his love is true, he won’t let anything come in the way,” Falak said gently. “So trust Zain’s love.”

“Exactly! Now smile — be happy,” Sarah added. “I swear, you have Allah’s special blessing upon you — you’re going to be tied to such a high-class family. Remember that dream you had, where you went on stage to receive the ‘Best Face of the Year’ award? I told you then, it’s a sign of a beautiful destiny.”

“I think you’re forgetting how that dream ended,” Nazli said wearily.

“Oh, dreams always end oddly when you wake up. Don’t overthink,” Falak said. “Anyway, show us the pictures you took there.”

Nazli opened her phone and showed them the selfies with Zain.

“Perfect couple!” Falak said admiringly.

Nazli smiled shyly.

✦✦✦✦✦✦

After classes, she instructed the driver to take her to her parents’ home. She sat in the back seat quietly, thoughts swirling like restless clouds. The car wound through the city’s busy roads, pausing at signals, finally entering the serene lanes of a posh neighbourhood. There stood her parents’ four-room bungalow — small, graceful, washed in the afternoon sun. Athar Mirza and his wife Bilqis lived alone there, two aging souls leaning gently upon each other. Their lives were peaceful yet heavy with silence, sustained by the rent from old properties and the remittances their son sent from abroad. Despite having both a son and a daughter, they led a life

steeped in solitude. Their elder son, Imran, lived overseas, depriving them of the laughter of grandchildren. Their daughter, Tazeen, lived within the same city but an hour's drive away, with her husband and young son. Imran visited perhaps once a year; Tazeen came once every few months. Her parents never demanded more. They accepted her explanations about her husband's "busy schedule" with quiet understanding. They had long realized that their son-in-law disliked frequent visits, and so, for the sake of their daughter's peace, they never insisted. It was not indifference but wisdom — a patience born of years. They knew their daughter loved them deeply, even if she often lied about why she could not come. And because they understood her heart, they chose to remain silent.

"Fazl Deen, didn't you hear the bell?" Bilqis called softly from the dining table, opening a packet of tablets beside her teacup.

"Yes, just going," Fazl Deen answered, hurrying from the corridor and heading toward the gate.

"Who could it be this early in the morning?" Athar Mirza asked, flipping a page of his newspaper.
His white beard and hair reflected age, yet his face — lined but kind — bore the marks of a man who had smiled through much of life.

"It's not early — it's already eleven," Bilqis said, glancing at the clock before turning back to her medicine. She was sixty-three, but years of illness had aged her beyond her time.

"Ask Samina to cook any vegetable dish for me today," Athar said with a yawn.

Samina and Fazl Deen, husband and wife, had lived in the servants' quarters for twenty years. Childless, their lives revolved entirely around serving this household. They visited their village rarely now; the elderly couple relied on them completely.

An intercom and an emergency bell linked their quarters to three rooms in the house — precaution against any sudden illness or fall. Athar and Bilqis trusted their presence more than they trusted the arrival of their own children.

They knew, if trouble came, the servants would reach before family ever could.

The lounge door opened, and Bilqis saw Tazeen step inside. Her face lit up instantly.

"Oh, it's Tazeen!" she exclaimed.

Athar lowered his newspaper and turned toward the door. Seeing his daughter, he rose at once.

Tazeen greeted softly and rested her head against his chest. “My daughter…” Athar whispered, kissing her forehead with trembling lips.

“We were just thinking of calling you. We’ve missed you so much.”

After hugging her mother, Tazeen placed her handbag on the table and sat down, her face strangely expressionless.

“Now that you’re here, stay till evening at least. You visit so rarely — let us decide when you’ll go back,” Bilqis said lovingly.

“Ammi, I’ve decided to stay — forever. I’m leaving Mohsin.”

Her voice was calm but unyielding. The words struck her parents like lightning.

“Wha… what do you mean, daughter?” Athar stammered.

“Yes, Papa. I’ve decided to leave Mohsin.”

“What’s come over you? Why are you frightening us like this in our old age?” Bilqis said, shaken.

“Frighten you? Ammi, do you even know what fear is? Neither did I — until today. But when I went to my son’s school this morning and saw what I saw, I learned what fear truly is.

Fear is what my little boy has been living with — at an age when children should be carefree. He’s been living in terror, crying without reason. And I’ve decided to free him from it. I’m filing for khula from Mohsin.”

The last sentence fell like a bombshell.

“Khula? Are you out of your mind? You’ll destroy your home!” Bilqis cried, her voice breaking.

“Home?” Tazeen said bitterly. “Ammi, I have no home to destroy — but yes, if I try to save it, I’ll destroy my child instead.”

Tears spilled freely down her cheeks. Her parents sat motionless, as if hearing the echo of a tragedy they could not stop.

“I endured it all because I didn’t want to bring shame upon myself — or you,” she continued. “I didn’t want to separate my son from his father. But after what I saw at school today, I realized my son’s mind is already scarred — and now, to save him, I must end this marriage.”

She covered her face with trembling hands, weeping quietly.

Bilqis and Athar remained silent; her words struck them like shards of glass.

“Maybe today you’ll think my decision is wrong,” she said through tears, “but if I don’t take this step now, I’ll ruin my son’s future. I won’t let him grow up broken like me.”

She slipped the wedding ring from her finger and placed it on the table.

“He might miss his father, but someday he’ll thank me for giving him a peaceful life.”

“But how will you live alone, daughter? A whole mountain of life lies ahead,” Bilqis whispered weakly.

“I’ve already lived through the worst loneliness — the one that exists inside a marriage. Now, being alone doesn’t frighten me. And I’m not alone — I have you both, and most of all, my son Kashan.”

Her voice softened at her son’s name. Tears filled her eyes again. Athar stood, tears shining in his own, and placed a trembling hand on her head. His silence spoke of quiet approval, of a father’s sorrowful pride.

Tazeen looked up at him and then broke down completely, collapsing into his arms.

✦✦✦✦✦

There was a knock on Zain’s bedroom door — sharp, rhythmic, unmistakable. From the sound of it, he instantly knew who it could be.

Still lying sprawled across his bed, Zain lowered the volume of the TV and called out lazily,
“Come in, Kareem!”

Kareem Bakhsh entered — a thin, alert nineteen-year-old youth who had worked in that house since childhood. His father, Qayyum Bakhsh, had served as the family’s watchman for many years until kidney failure forced him to return to the village. Before leaving, he had arranged employment for both his sons in Afzal’s household — a final act of loyalty to the family he had served all his life.

From the age of nine to nineteen, Kareem had grown up as part of that house — quiet, dependable, and invisible. Zain and he were almost of the same age; as children, they had even played cricket together in the courtyard. Over time, Zain had begun entrusting his personal affairs to Kareem — not by duty, but by choice.

Kareem handled everything: pressing Zain's clothes, keeping his wardrobe arranged, serving him food, cleaning his room, tending to guests, and fetching whatever Zain might need. And Zain, indulgent and careless, preferred it that way.

When Zain was home, Kareem often sat nearby watching cricket or scrolling channels on TV, and Zain never objected. Afzal and Huma believed that their son tolerated him out of childhood familiarity — that he simply felt comfortable with the boy who had grown up under the same roof.

What they did not know, however, was that Kareem also carried out certain errands for Zain — private tasks that went far beyond household chores.

At Zain's call, Kareem opened the door, glanced quickly down the hallway to ensure no one was watching, then stepped inside and shut it quietly behind him.

From beneath his shirt, he pulled out three envelopes, neatly folded and slightly damp from sweat.

"They came by courier," he said briefly, handing them over.

Zain took them without expression. "Lock the door," he said, his tone low.

Kareem obeyed, then turned his eyes to the muted news channel flickering on the TV as Zain began opening the envelopes one by one.

The first was a notice from his college — a warning about his low attendance, sent directly to inform his parents. Zain's lip curled faintly; he tossed it aside.

The second envelope contained his examination results — C's across most subjects. He glanced over them once and flung the papers toward the desk.

The third envelope, however, caught his attention — a bank statement from his mother Huma's account. He unfolded it slowly and studied it line by line. Several withdrawals appeared under forged signatures. Zain's eyes sharpened.

He read the document carefully, then tore it into small pieces — and the envelope with it.

After a moment's thought, he gathered the torn fragments and handed them to Kareem. Without a word, Kareem stepped forward, scooped up the bits of paper, and carried them to the dustbin inside Zain's dressing room.

"Bring my wallet," Zain ordered.

Kareem fetched it from the table. Zain took out a thousand-rupee note and handed it over — his unspoken payment for silence.

Kareem pocketed the note, picked up the empty tea tray from the side table, and left the room as quietly as he had entered.

✦✦✦

The final class of the day was in progress.

Professor Najeeb Dar — fair-skinned, tall, brown-haired, with eyes like drops of amber glinting in the light — stood at the front of the classroom. At thirty, he was the youngest professor in the college and one of its most beloved. He taught English Literature and Grammar to the Intermediate Pre-Medical section, though his lectures rarely stayed confined to the syllabus. He would begin with a text from the book, and soon the discussion would drift — into psychology, medical science, philosophy, information technology, even cinema. His classes carried the vibrant energy of conversation rather than instruction. Students could joke, question, and comment freely, though he never allowed indecency or mockery.

Many called him “The Psychiatrist” because he seemed to understand not only literature but the minds of those who studied it.

“Many people believe,” he was saying that day, pacing slowly before the blackboard, “that schizophrenia should not be termed madness — but rather, a disorder of the mind.”

“Meaning, sir,” called out Daniyal from the back row, “insanity shouldn’t be called madness? Then what’s the difference between the two?”

“The difference,” Professor Dar replied calmly, “is that schizophrenia alters one’s ability to hear, think, and understand. Their perception of reality itself changes. They begin to see the world through a different lens.”

“Then this isn’t an illness at all, sir! Because everyone nowadays sees the world differently!” Raza interrupted, earning laughter from the class.

“I personally know someone like that,” said Urooj in her foreign-accented voice from the front row. “They always feel as if someone’s watching them.”

Professor Dar folded his long arms and stepped forward, stopping before the first row where Nazli, Sarah, and Falak sat.

“How many of you,” he asked, “know about Nobel Prize-winning economist Sir John Nash?”

The class fell silent.

Just then, Nazli felt her phone vibrate inside her bag. Her heartbeat quickened. She waited for the professor to turn his back before quietly sliding the phone out.

It was Zain — calling again. Sixteen missed calls.

He never called during college hours. But ever since the engagement night, their longing for each other had deepened into an ache. Nazli was now as restless as he once was; her mornings began with his thought, her nights ended with his voice echoing in her mind.

“Sir, are you referring to that mad professor whose life they made a movie about?” a student teased, breaking the quiet. “I forget the name…”

“Indeed — *A Beautiful Mind*,” Professor Dar said, eyes lighting up. “Sir John Nash spent much of his life suffering from schizophrenia.”

The class chuckled again.

Nazli seized the chance. She slipped her phone out fully, read the caller ID — and hesitated. Her fingers hovered over the screen.

Then she quietly rose, picked up her bag, and slipped out of the classroom.

As she walked down the corridor, she dialled Zain’s number. He picked up on the first ring.

“Oh God, why weren’t you picking up?” he said immediately, his tone edged with impatience.

“Zain, I was in class! Even now I’ve stepped out after seeing your calls. What’s happened?”

She smiled slightly — half-annoyed, half-amused by his urgency. The breeze in the corridor caught her scarf as she descended the stairs.

“I’m coming to pick you up,” Zain said curtly. His tone suggested he was already on the road.

“What?” Nazli stopped mid-step.

“I’m coming to your college to pick you up. Come to the gate.”

“Zain, this isn’t the time for jokes. I’m going back to class — I’m missing my lecture.”

“Are you crazy? I’m serious — I’m coming to your college.”

“You’re crazy, I’m serious — wow, that could be the title of a movie!” Nazli laughed softly.

“You think I’m joking? When I come there and take your hand in front of everyone, then you’ll believe me.”

“Zain! So now you’ll get me disgraced here?” she said, suppressing her laughter.

“Holding your hand will disgrace you?”

“No — it’ll make me famous, of course. What else? If a strange man comes and takes my hand, it’s disgrace — nothing else.”

“So I’m a strange man to you now? This same strange man to whom you send love-filled messages day and night? Where’s that love now — afraid of what people will say?”

“Loving you doesn’t mean I should hold your hand in front of the whole world. I can express my love only to you, not to people. Public display isn’t necessary — and if I do it, it’ll bring nothing but disgrace.”

“So that means you think of me as less than yourself? Because true lovers value their beloved more than their own selves.”

“Zain, for God’s sake — what exactly are you trying to say? Speak plainly!”

“You know very well what I mean — but perhaps I was the one who didn’t understand till now. Today I’ve realized: for you, what people think matters more than meeting me. Fine — we’ll talk about this later.”

He disconnected.

Nazli froze where she stood, unable to comprehend how such harmless teasing had turned into fury. The laughter drained from her face. Her hands trembled as she redialled. The line was busy. She tried again — busy again. Within ten minutes, she called twenty-two times. Each attempt met either a cut line or silence. Then she began sending messages — apologies, explanations, pleas — fourteen in total. Zain did not respond. The world seemed to tilt around her. She stood motionless, one hand on her forehead, her heart pounding painfully in her chest. When at last she turned back toward her classroom, she walked as if in a daze.

All eyes turned toward her when she entered — every student, even Professor Dar.

“Nazli, are you all right?” he asked kindly, ignoring the giggles.

“Yes, sir. I’m perfectly fine,” she replied softly, lowering her eyes and flipping through her book as though trying to catch up on pages she couldn’t see.

“Sir, a little while ago you said schizophrenia changes a person’s way of hearing, thinking, even seeing the world,” said a student from the back row, pointing teasingly toward her. The room erupted with laughter.

Professor Dar frowned but said nothing further. The class continued another ten minutes.

Nazli heard none of it. Her mind had turned to white noise. When the bell rang, Nazli barely noticed. She gathered her books with trembling hands, her thoughts still circling around Zain’s abrupt words.

“Nazli, what’s wrong with your face? Everyone noticed you looked so off,” Sarah asked as soon as class ended.

Falak walked over, her expression curious. “You walked into class as if some terrible disaster had just struck!” she added.

“No, nothing… I’m fine,” Nazli replied quickly, avoiding their eyes as she slipped her books into her bag.

She checked her phone again — no messages, no missed calls. The blank screen felt like a verdict.

Sarah and Falak exchanged a glance.

“I’m leaving — my driver must be waiting outside,” Falak said, waving lightly as she exited.

Nazli stared at the screen again, and an ache rose in her chest — sharp, suffocating.

“Nazli, what happened? Say something,” Sarah urged, her voice softening.

“Drop me home today, please — let’s go to the cafeteria first and talk,” Nazli said quietly.

“Of course. Come on,” Sarah replied, slinging her bag over her shoulder.

The two of them walked side by side down the corridor. The cafeteria was nearly empty — college hours had ended, and the late afternoon light streamed faintly through the windows.

Nazli followed Sarah to a table at the far corner and sat down, her head still lowered, fingers moving over her phone screen as she typed yet another *sorry* to Zain.

Sarah returned from the counter carrying two milkshakes and a packet of French fries. She placed one set before Nazli and the other before herself, then gazed through the glass door at the sunlight spilling onto the attached lawn.

“What’s wrong with you?” she asked finally. “What did Zain say?”

Nazli told her everything — each word, each tone of his voice, every silence that had followed.

Sarah listened, then sighed. “I’m just surprised you’re making such a big deal about going out with him. Considering how crazy you’ve become for him, I don’t know how you’re even controlling yourself.”

Nazli smiled faintly. “It’s just… he never insisted like that before. And you know me — before this, I never even had a male friend, let alone a love affair.”

She stirred her milkshake absently with the straw, as though looking for something hidden in it.

“Well, now you do — and that’s not a crime,” Sarah teased. “You’ve changed so much. Honestly, I think you should loosen your ‘Saint Nazli’ chains a little. There’s no harm in going on a date.”

Nazli looked up, half amused, half disapproving. Sarah’s tone was carefree, worldly — so different from her own.

“Yes, yes — go meet him,” Sarah continued, smiling mischievously. “You love him, don’t you? He loves you too. That’s why he wants to see you. Go, exchange gifts — that’s what love stories are made of!”

Nazli blushed, her lips curving slightly. “I was actually thinking of buying him a gift too, but he’s so rich… I can’t afford anything worthy of him.”

“Don’t worry about money — you can take some from me,” Sarah said casually. “Or borrow, if your pride insists. Repay me later.”

Nazli didn’t respond. Her gaze lingered on the half-empty glass before her.

“Sarah… do you think Zain will marry me?” she asked suddenly, her voice trembling.

Sarah froze. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. My heart keeps asking me this question, and I never have an answer.”

“Why don’t you just ask him directly? Has he ever talked about marriage or… anything serious?”

“Never,” Nazli admitted. “I’ve never had the courage to ask. But today I realize — if Zain isn’t part of my life, I won’t be able to live at all. Since we met, he’s never ignored me — not once. And now, just over this tiny thing, he’s angry, not answering my calls, not replying to my messages…”

Her voice broke. “You can’t imagine what I’m going through. If he doesn’t marry me — if we can’t be together — I’ll die inside while still alive.”

Tears spilled down her cheeks.

Sarah’s expression softened immediately. She reached across the table and took Nazli’s hand, her voice gentle.

“Listen, Nazli — I think you’re losing yourself in his love. You’re afraid — afraid to face the truth, afraid to hear a no. Some rejections hurt too much, and maybe you just don’t want to face that pain.”

Nazli wiped her tears. Her silence said she agreed more than she wanted to.

“Don’t be so sad,” Sarah continued. “Every relationship has small fights. He’s upset now, but he hasn’t left you. So don’t be this shattered. And if he contacts you again, don’t refuse to meet him. He loves you, and you love him — that’s what matters.”

“Of course I want to see him,” Nazli said softly. “But I’m scared someone might see us together or—”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake!” Sarah interrupted. “No one’s watching you! It’s not like he’ll take you to a bazaar. He’ll meet you somewhere private, safe. You’re just overthinking. Now fix your face — I’m sure he’ll contact you tonight, or by tomorrow morning.”

Nazli managed a small smile. A bit of colour returned to her cheeks.

Sarah’s phone rang — her driver had arrived. Both girls stood up, gathered their bags, and left the cafeteria.

As soon as Nazli settled into Sarah’s car, she typed a message to Zain.

“I’ll meet you. Tell me where.”

Then she pressed send — and leaned back against the seat, eyes closed, her heart beating fast with a strange mixture of fear and hope.

✦✦✦✦

Tazeen inserted the key into the lock and turned it swiftly. The door opened with a faint creak. Behind her stood Athar Mirza, silent and grave. Once she stepped in, he followed without a word.

Without pausing, Tazeen walked toward her bedroom. Her movements were brisk, almost mechanical, as if driven by some invisible urgency. Athar Mirza lowered himself into a sofa in the TV lounge, watching her vanish down the corridor.

Inside the room, Tazeen began pulling down clothes from hangers, tossing them one after another onto the bed. Her hands shook slightly, yet she worked with fierce determination. It took her nearly half an hour, but at last she gathered her garments and stuffed them into two suitcases.

Dragging the heavy cases out of her room, she brought them into the lounge. Tears streamed silently down her cheeks, unstoppable.

Then she went into her son Kashan’s room.

Athar called to the driver, instructing him to come in and carry the luggage to the car. The man obeyed without question. As he placed the suitcases neatly into the trunk, Tazeen was inside, packing Kashan’s belongings — tiny shirts, folded trousers, schoolbooks — each item touched with a trembling tenderness.

When she turned to the wooden shelf, her heart clenched. Lined neatly upon it were Kashan’s toys — the plastic cars, the action figures, the little red drum she had once bought him from a fair. She began gathering them carefully, one by one, placing each into a trolley bag.

Moments ago, this room had been full of innocence — bright, cheerful, alive. Now it looked as though a storm had swept through, leaving behind the quiet wreckage of heartbreak.

Tazeen had already sent Athar’s driver earlier to fetch Kashan from school. She had told him to bring the boy directly to her husband’s house.

When the car arrived, the driver helped Kashan out and rang the bell. Athar's own driver opened the latch; he had just parked the family car and was arranging the luggage in the porch.

The moment Kashan entered, he sensed the strange stillness in the house. His gaze fell on his grandfather, and he ran to him with open arms.

"Grandfather!" he cried joyfully.

Athar Mirza lifted him, kissed his cheeks, and looked deeply into his face — and as he did, the memory of Tazeen's words earlier that morning echoed painfully in his mind. His smile faded.

"Madam, I'm going to the office now," said Mohsin's driver, appearing at the doorway. "Shall I serve lunch to the sir?"

"No," Tazeen said quickly, her voice steady. "The sir will be eating outside today."

She dismissed him with a nod.

Then she stood in the center of the room, her eyes scanning everything — the walls, the furniture, the curtains she had chosen herself. Was she forgetting anything? Anything that might still tie her here?

Her gaze fell upon the dressing table. Upon it stood a photo frame.

She walked toward it slowly, picked it up — and froze.

It was their picture, hers and Mohsin's, taken soon after Kashan's birth. They both looked young and radiant, their smiles full of promise.

Looking at that photograph now, no one could have guessed how cruelly time would turn — how that same home would collapse like a bird's nest scattered by the wind, its twigs never to be gathered again.

Her fingers trembled. For a fleeting second, a voice inside her asked, *Am I the one destroying this nest?* But another voice — the stronger one — answered, *No. I'm saving my child from the storm that destroyed me.*

"Mama, where are we going?" Kashan asked softly, tugging at her sleeve.

"We're going to Grandmother's house, my dear," Tazeen said, forcing a smile as she untied the ribbon of his school tie.

"Why?" he asked, his little voice puzzled.

“Now we shall stay there,” she said gently, folding the tie and placing it in her handbag.

Then she turned toward Athar. “Let’s go now, Papa.”

Athar stood without a word. Together, the three of them walked out of the house — she and her father carrying not only suitcases, but the invisible weight of years.

The car pulled away from the driveway, heading toward her parents’ home.

Kashan, unaware of the gravity of the moment, chattered happily with his grandfather. He always became talkative when the world around him felt safe.

Behind them, the house stood still, hollow, abandoned.

Mohsin’s driver, confused by the entire scene, returned to the office and relayed what he had witnessed — the suitcases, the grandfather’s presence, Tazeen’s expression, and her final words.

It was as though someone had struck Mohsin with a bolt of electricity.

He stood up so abruptly that the chair fell backward. In one motion, he snatched the car keys from the table, grabbed his coat, and stormed out. His footsteps echoed through the empty hallway — sharp, furious, echoing the collapse of everything he had thought he controlled.

✦✦✦

It was half past eleven that night.

Nazli sat in her room, the soft yellow light of the table lamp falling over her books. Sana had already gone to sleep on the other bed. Above them, the ceiling fan hummed and creaked — that familiar, uneven rhythm that filled the night with its own kind of restlessness.

She had always been irritated by that sound, yet tonight it felt oddly comforting — a background murmur to her tangled thoughts.

Her open book lay untouched. For the past hour, she had been taking out a small red velvet jewellery box from her bag, opening it, gazing at the ring inside — then slipping it on her finger, taking it off again, and tucking it carefully back.

It wasn’t an expensive ring. A round golden band, a blue stone at its center — simple, unremarkable to anyone else.

But to Nazli, it was the most precious thing she had ever owned.

Because Zain had placed it on her finger himself.

She smiled faintly at the memory.

Earlier that morning, she had given in to his request to meet — her first real step beyond the boundaries she had drawn all her life. She had gotten off one stop before college, just as they had planned.

Zain had been waiting. They had driven for hours through quiet streets, and for some time, parked by the sea — talking, laughing, dreaming.

Before parting, Zain had slipped the ring onto her finger.

Nazli had surrendered to that moment, to that promise — and she felt no regret. Only a trembling joy.

For the first time, she felt what freedom and belonging could mean in the same breath.

The guilt that tried to rise within her heart, she silenced quickly — because Zain's love, in its intensity, had become her entire world.

And that ring — that delicate circle of gold — was the proof of his devotion.

All day, his words echoed in her mind like the chorus of a song she could not stop replaying:

"Wherever I go, the memory of you keeps following me."

"I've never talked to anyone for this long — it's only with you."

"I will never leave you. I can never leave you."

"This ring will never let you be apart from me — it will always remind you of me."

Each memory filled her chest with warmth. The scent of his perfume still lingered faintly in her scarf, in her hair, in the air around her.

She remembered asking him its name that morning.

"It's called Hermis. Why? Do you want it?" he had said, teasing.

"Yes, I'll buy it," she had replied.

"You'll wear men's perfume?"

"Yes — why not? This perfume will make me feel your presence."

“I’m always around you, never really far,” Zain had whispered, his gaze soft and magnetic.

Nazli’s heartbeat had gone wild then — a rhythm of devotion and fear intertwined.

Later, at college, Sarah and Falak had noticed the ring immediately.

“This doesn’t look like real gold to me,” Sarah had said, turning it under the light.

Nazli’s smile had faltered. “Even if it’s brass, for me, it’s a diamond ring,” she had replied, slipping it back onto her finger.

“I don’t know why, but it really doesn’t shine like gold,” Falak had added.

Their careless words had stung — not because of doubt, but because of pride. How could they think Zain would give her anything less than pure gold?

“Anyway, if it’s artificial, you’ll find out soon enough,” Falak had said after class. “The colour will change.”

Nazli had turned away without replying.

That night, their words echoed again in her mind. She looked down at the ring gleaming faintly under the lamplight.

Perhaps this is what a wedding ring must feel like, she thought — this strange completeness.

She didn’t want to take it off.

The power went out suddenly; the fan stopped. The silence felt heavy.

In the darkness, she slipped the ring onto her right hand, fearing it might fall unseen.

She began searching for a matchbox to light a candle, and as she did, she began forming excuses — the story she would tell her family if they asked about the ring.

She would say she had ordered it through Sara and paid for it by selling her old gold ring — the one Javaid had once gifted her.

Yes, she thought — she would sell that ring and buy Zain his favourite perfume instead.

The moment the plan formed, it felt as if light filled the darkness around her. She smiled quietly, comforted by her own resolve.

✦✦✦

The next morning, Nazli arrived at college early — her steps light but her mind set with quiet determination. She shared her plan with Falak and Sarah as soon as they met in the courtyard.

Both were horrified.

“Have you lost your mind?” Falak exclaimed, gripping her arm. “You’re really going to sell your father’s ring?”

“What’s the need to buy such an expensive gift?” Sarah added. “Zain will love you without it.”

Nazli only smiled faintly. “Because I love him,” she said softly, yet with an unshakable calm.

“Fine, but that doesn’t mean you should buy a fifteen-thousand-rupee perfume!” Falak said as they stepped into a shop at the mall near their college. The shelves gleamed with bottles — heavy glass and gold lettering, the air thick with layered fragrances.

“This ring is so beautiful,” Falak murmured, turning Nazli’s gold ring in her hand. “Even prettier than the one Zain gave you.”

Nazli looked at it one last time — the ring her father had gifted her on her insistence years ago. “Everything that’s mine belongs to Zain anyway,” she said with a tender smile.

Sarah sighed and shook her head. “You’ve gone mad.”

“If you really want to sell something,” Falak said bluntly, “sell the ring Zain gave you instead. Buy his perfume with that money.”

“Are you out of your mind?” Nazli flared. “How can I sell the gift he gave me? What would he think?”

“And what will your father think,” Sarah countered, “when he finds out you sold his gift?”

“Nothing in this world matters more to me than Zain’s love,” Nazli said firmly.

Falak’s voice rose slightly. “And in that love, you’ve forgotten your father’s affection!”

Nazli fell silent. The words struck deep, but she refused to let them sway her.

Both girls exchanged helpless glances.

“No matter how much you both stop me,” Nazli said at last, “I’ll give Zain the best gift I can. Because there’s no one I love more in this world.”

And before either could speak again, she walked toward the jeweller’s shop. Falak and Sarah stood in silence, watching her small figure move away, her dupatta fluttering like a soft flag of defiance.

✦✦✦

That night, under a restless sky, Nazli climbed to the rooftop of her house with her phone in hand. The wind was strong; it tangled her hair and lifted her scarf like a whispering shadow.

She dialled Zain’s number.

At that moment, miles away, Zain sat at a friend’s farmhouse — a place dimly lit and heavy with smoke. On the table lay bottles of whisky and beer cans. One of his friends was lighting a cigarette; another leaned over, snorting cocaine off the glass surface.

Zain, in a half-unbuttoned shirt, held a glass of wine in one hand and a cigarette in the other. His eyes were glazed, his laughter loud, his mind unmoored.

Nazli’s name kept flashing on his phone screen. Irritated, he finally picked up.

“Oh, Nazli! How are you?” His voice was thick, his tone careless.

“Were you asleep?” Nazli asked instantly, surprised by the sluggishness in his speech.

“How did you know?” Zain teased, grinning lazily.

“Your voice sounds sleepy.”

“Only my voice? My eyes and brain are asleep too. Even my thoughts are dozing.” He laughed — a rough, drunken laugh.

“Oh, I thought your heart and mind were full of only me,” Nazli said playfully, unaware of his state.

“You?” Zain said, feigning confusion.

“Yes, me! Why — am I not?”

“No, no, you’re right,” he muttered. “I’d almost forgotten.”

Nazli’s smile wavered. “You’re talking strangely today, Zain. Your tone sounds different.”

“Maybe today’s tone is the real one — and the earlier one was fake.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, puzzled.

“Forget it — how did you manage to call me now?” Zain changed the subject abruptly.

“Everyone’s gone to a wedding. It’s just me and my brother Ameen at home,” she said, tucking her hair behind her ear as the wind whipped around her.

“Oh, then I should come over,” he said with a lazy chuckle.

“Anyway, Zain, you always ask to meet me — but today I wanted to say that *we must meet*.”

He whistled. “Really? What’s the occasion?”

“There’s a special reason,” she said, smiling.

“Let me guess — are we getting married?” Zain laughed again.

“No, I’m not running away from home to get married,” she said, amused.

“Then get married and *then* run away!” he said, his voice strange, almost slurred.

Nazli’s laughter faded. “What do you mean?”

“I told you — I’m sleepy,” he replied vaguely.

“You must be really tired. Call me when you wake up. Are you feeling all right?”

“Everything’s fine. We’ll meet soon,” Zain said, eyes half-shut.

“I’ll be waiting!” Nazli smiled softly into the wind.

“Okay, sweetheart. Love you!” he mumbled, and disconnected.

Nazli stood there a moment longer, her scarf rippling in the night air. His tone had been odd — distant — yet she convinced herself it was only fatigue.

She pressed the phone to her chest and smiled. That night, sleep came to her easily, her dreams wrapped in Zain’s voice.

But far away, under flickering yellow lights, Zain had resumed drinking. His friends were laughing loudly, the air thick with smoke and arrogance.

“These middle-class girls are such strange creatures,” Zain said suddenly, leaning back in his chair.

“Who are you talking about now?” one of his friends asked with a grin.

“Oh, some poor girl I came across,” Zain said, swirling the glass in his hand.

“Who?”

“Just some girl,” Zain laughed. “I gave her a cheap little ring, and now she thinks I’m going to marry her.”

Laughter exploded around the table.

“Why, haven’t you married her yet?” one friend teased.

“No, man — didn’t have the time! The first time I called her, she wouldn’t even talk.”

He mimicked Nazli’s soft voice mockingly: “‘Why have you called me?’ — and hung up right away!”

The group roared with laughter.

“When I asked to meet, she started preaching about decency and virtue,” he added, his tone dripping with sarcasm.

“Then what happened?” another asked, wiping tears of laughter.

“I felt like I was the hero of some old black-and-white film — and she, the naïve heroine!” Zain laughed so hard he could barely breathe.

“And look now! Today she calls me herself and says, ‘Zain, we must meet soon!’”

He mimicked her tone again. More laughter erupted.

One of the boys leaned back, smirking. “So the saint has fallen.”

Zain pushed himself up unsteadily and walked toward a mirror on the wall. His reflection grinned back — sharp, intoxicated, self-satisfied.

“Tell me,” he said, his voice rising above the noise, “what girl would dare ignore me? The mark of Zain is always found on a beautiful girl’s cheek — no matter how decent she pretends to be!”

His friends whistled and clapped.

Behind the laughter, the faint sound of glass breaking echoed — a glass knocked over by Zain’s careless hand, spilling red wine across the floor like blood.

✦✦✦✦✦✦

Chapter Two — The Defeat of Desire

Javaid was taking breakfast while Roshan Ara moved briskly between the kitchen and the dining table, setting down plates and dishes in quick succession. At that moment Amir entered, fully dressed and ready to leave for the shop.

“Mum, give me some breakfast too,” he said, fastening the last button of his shirt.

“Listen! Sana has started a job at a school. Nazli goes to college and I shoulder my husband’s duties. Your wife is there to indulge your whims—tell *her* to do it all,” Roshan Ara snapped, her tone sharp with irritation.

Sana had indeed begun working a week earlier at a nearby school, with her fiancé Shehzad’s consent. Since then, the task of preparing breakfast for the children and her husband had fallen upon Roshan Ara. Ordinarily Anita made Javaid’s breakfast, but that morning she was unwell.

“Anita is not feeling well, Mom. I let her sleep on purpose—she went to bed late,” Amir replied earnestly.

“She’s *always* feeling unwell,” Roshan Ara retorted with cutting sarcasm.

“Please, Mum, I can’t argue so early in the morning. Forgive me,” Amir said, folding his hands in appeal.

“Fine then—no breakfast. Go eat outside! Your wife can sleep and your mother will go on baking *rotis* forever,” Roshan Ara pouted, sinking onto a chair in exaggerated offence.

“Roshan Ara, why must you flare up over such trifles? Amir, come sit here and eat with me,” Javaid said gently, beckoning his son.

“No, Father, I’m going. Mum never stops insulting me—and Anita.” With those angry words, Amir stormed out.

“That was wrong, Roshan Ara! You’ve gone too far,” Javaid scolded once Amir had gone.

“I only speak the truth—he should bring a wife to serve him,” she retorted, shaking her head.

“There’s a way to speak truth; this is not it,” Javaid replied, offended. Roshan Ara muttered under her breath, gathered the dishes, and left the room. Javaid finished his breakfast silently and departed for the shop.

For reasons she could not explain, after preparing Anita’s lunch Roshan Ara went straight to her room. Anita was busy tidying it.

“Make Amir’s breakfast from now on—it’s your duty. All my life I’ve risen early to cook for my husband; it’s nothing unusual,” Roshan Ara said in her customary indifferent tone.

“Amir didn’t wake me up,” Anita answered nervously.

“No one wakes me either, yet I always know when the men of the house must leave to earn—that’s how one manages,” Roshan Ara said, rolling her eyes.

“You won’t have any complaint from tomorrow,” Anita said quickly, startled.

“Yes—remember that,” Roshan Ara replied curtly. “Surely you behaved the same in your own home—that’s why your stepmother hated you.” She threw the words like stones and walked away, glaring as she left.

The moment Roshan Ara was gone, Anita snatched up her phone and dialled Amir.

“If you had woken me in the morning, Mum wouldn’t have insulted me so much,” she said, her voice trembling with tears.

“Don’t worry—ignore it,” Amir snapped, already weary.

“Why should *I* be the only one to ignore everyone? Why doesn’t anyone ignore *me*?” Anita sobbed.

“Someone has to be ignored,” Amir replied flatly.

“I’ll go to my father and beg forgiveness—whether you come or not,” Anita cried.

“I’m not stopping you, but think: what if they call the police or take action? Then what?” Amir cautioned.

“Nothing will happen. If I fall at their feet, they’ll forgive me—I’m sure,” Anita insisted through her tears.

“They don’t even take your calls,” Amir reminded her.

“What good have I done them? I left in disgrace, and since coming here I’m humiliated every day,” she wept. Whenever Anita’s heart grew heavy, thoughts of Ikram tormented her. Six months had passed since she had come to this house, and even now Roshan Ara’s only offering toward her was grudging prayers.

“I’m being humiliated too—always. Why doesn’t she think of that?” Amir sighed.

“Just listen to me, Amir. Let’s go to my father’s place tomorrow. I can’t bear this anymore,” Anita pleaded between sobs.

Amir pondered a moment, then said, “All right—but if they don’t forgive us, I’ll never go again.”

“They *will* forgive us,” Anita said, wiping her tears with sudden conviction.

✦✦✦

Wearing black sunglasses clipped into her hair, Huma emerged from the mall and walked briskly toward the parking lot. Sliding into the back seat, she instructed the driver to head to a jeweller’s shop in the city and began dialling on her phone.

“I checked at the mall, but they don’t have this design. Now I’ll have to go to Aziz Jewellers—I don’t usually shop there, but they’ll have it,” she said into the receiver before pocketing her mobile.

“Do you remember Aziz Jewellers on Tariq Road? Take me there,” she told the driver, slipping her sunglasses over her eyes.

The car sped through Karachi’s fierce traffic from Defence to Tariq Road’s main market. They parked; Huma stepped out, her streaked hair loose over fawn-coloured trousers. Pushing the black glasses up into her hair, she knocked lightly on the glass door.

The shopkeeper recognized her instantly, rose, and unlocked the door. It was by sheer chance that Huma had come here after such a long time. She set several jewellery boxes from her handbag onto the showcase. When the other female customers left, the shopkeeper turned to her with designs. She wished to alter some of her old pieces—thus her visit.

“Yes, this one will do,” Huma decided, finalizing a design. She was drawing out the advance payment when the shopkeeper remarked,

“Mr. Zain was here a few days ago.”

For a heartbeat Huma could not believe what she had heard.

“Zain was here—in *your* shop? Why?” she asked, dropping everything and standing upright.

“Yes, he wanted a lady’s ring. Perhaps his ATM wasn’t dispensing cash, so he took a fake gold one—he seemed in a hurry,” the man said casually. Huma felt as if she had been thrust onto a roaring highway, the dust of speeding cars striking her face from every direction.

“Did he say why he wanted that ring?” she asked foolishly, then immediately regretted it.

“No—why would he tell us that?” the shopkeeper replied with a knowing smile, perceiving her disquiet.

“So you *gave* him the ring?” she pressed, needing to be certain.

“We didn’t have it at first, but we arranged one—he needed it urgently. Something around two thousand rupees,” the shopkeeper said. At that moment new customers entered, and Huma knew further questioning would be improper.

She returned to the car. The driver started the engine and drove her home, while storms gathered in her mind. Zain buying a ring—from this very shop—for some girl. The thought pounded like traffic in her skull. The car’s air-conditioning could not dry the sweat forming on her brow. Huma belonged to an elite world, but her maternal worry was no less fierce than that of any middle-class mother. She could not bear the idea of a girl she disliked snatching her son away—especially at twenty. She resolved to uncover the truth, even if she had to hire an FBI agent—and if they refused, she would investigate herself.

✦✦✦

In the apartment parking lot, Zain parked his car and stepped out, glancing casually around before opening the passenger door for Nazli. She emerged, draped in a black shawl over her college uniform, holding a small gift packet — the perfume she had brought for him.

“Why did we come here?” Nazli asked softly. The sight of the towering, multimillion-rupee apartments left her quietly awed, yet she still did not understand why Zain had brought her here. As usual, he had picked her up near the college, and after driving around the leafy streets of Defence for almost an hour, he had parked at this ocean-facing complex.

“To sit somewhere calm,” Zain replied simply.

“Here?” she repeated in surprise.

“We have an apartment on the tenth floor,” he said, tilting his chin upward to point.

“The apartment stays empty — it’s used as a guesthouse. What better place could there be for us to meet?” he added, locking eyes with her and smiling in that practiced, magnetic way. There was a charm in his tone — a confidence that always seemed to disarm her defenses. “Zain, I think we should leave,” Nazli said at last,

struggling to steady herself despite her unease. “I don’t think I should go there alone with you.” The smile faded from Zain’s face. “Why?” he asked, a faint edge in his voice.

“Because it doesn’t feel right — all of this,” Nazli replied firmly, though her voice trembled. She didn’t want to sound distrustful; in truth, she trusted Zain more than anyone. But her conscience tugged at her — warning her against a step that could later fill her with regret. She wanted a *future* with Zain, but not one that began with shame.

To her, this love was something pure — her first, and perhaps her last. She had already done so much that defied her upbringing: leaving college early, sneaking away to meet him. But going alone to an apartment felt like crossing an invisible line, one that no girl of her background could easily return from.

“Who will see you here except me?” Zain asked, lowering his voice.

“God — God is watching,” Nazli answered simply.

“Nazli, I swear I sometimes don’t understand you,” Zain said, half teasing, half irritated. “If you want to live by God and the Prophet’s way, then even standing unveiled before me is wrong, isn’t it?”

His tone stung. For a moment, Nazli hesitated beside the car, lost in thought. After a few minutes of silence, she finally nodded. Perhaps it would be fine, she told herself. He wasn’t forcing her.

“Zain! I brought this for you,” she said, handing him the small packet.

“Wow — what is it?” Zain took it, examining it with a smile.

“Your favourite thing,” Nazli said shyly.

“All right, let’s go up and see,” Zain said, reaching out his hand toward her. Nazli ignored it, pretending to think it a joke, and walked beside him toward the lift. Zain drew his hand back, smirking faintly.

✦✦✦

As soon as Huma reached home, she summoned Kareem Bakhsh and made him stand before her in the TV lounge. She had often seen the servant whispering with Zain, but she had ignored it — assuming it was about some petty personal problem or a borrowed sum. But Zain secretly buying a ring had changed everything.

In their elite circle, children’s affairs were never kept from parents. If Zain was hiding this, it meant something serious.

“Look, I won’t tolerate any acting now. When I ask, you’ll answer me clearly,” Huma said, studying Kareem’s face as she crossed one leg over the other.

“Yes, ma’am,” Kareem murmured, hands clasped behind his back, eyes lowered.

“What kind of conversations do you have with Zain?” she began.

“There aren’t any conversations like that,” he stammered.

“Listen, hiding what I already know won’t help you. Tell me everything,” Huma said coldly. She had no solid evidence, but she believed a sharp tone could make the boy confess.

“Ma’am, I’ve worked here for years — don’t you trust me?” Kareem pleaded.

“I’ve often seen you sneaking to Zain’s room unnecessarily. Now before I call the police, tell me the truth,” Huma said, picking up her cell phone as if ready to dial.

For a poor nineteen-year-old servant, even the word *police* was terrifying. His mind raced to his sick parents in the village, to his brother working in Afzal’s factory. If Huma turned against him, his whole family could be ruined.

“Look, if you tell me the truth, I won’t harm you,” Huma said, noting his growing panic. “In fact, I might even reward you. But if you lie, I’ll make sure your brother loses his job too.”

Her voice was steady, almost calm — but her words struck him like lashes.

“By God, ma’am, I didn’t do anything. Zain only told me that if any mail came for him — from college or bank — I should collect it from the gatekeeper and hand it to him directly. That’s all,” Kareem said breathlessly.

Huma’s eyes widened. “And what does he give you for this?”

“Sometimes a few hundred rupees… whenever I bring him the mail,” Kareem confessed.

“How long has this been going on?”

“For about two years.”

“Do you know where he keeps those envelopes?”

“No, ma’am. He reads them, tears them up, and throws them away — I throw the pieces in the dustbin.”

“And how much do you get for taking out the trash?” Huma asked with acid sweetness.

“I never took extra money,” Kareem replied simply, covering his ears in distress.

Huma bit her lip, deep in thought. The boy’s innocence was apparent. She softened her tone. “All right, go now — but remember, not a word of this to Zain. If he finds out, I won’t forgive you.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Kareem stammered and hurried away.

Huma rose at once, strode to Zain’s room, and began searching every drawer and cupboard. Finding nothing, she picked up the phone and called Zain’s school administration. After several inquiries that brought new revelations, she decided her next stop would be the bank. She was determined not to end the day still in darkness.

✦✦✦

The elevator doors slid open. Zain and Nazli stepped out before the apartment’s main entrance. Zain unlocked the door and led her inside.

The spacious four-room apartment took Nazli’s breath away. Every piece of furniture gleamed; the curtains were fine silk, the décor elegant and expensive. She had never seen such a place before — certainly not in the modest homes of her relatives.

“This is a very lovely apartment,” she said with a smile.

“Yes, just like you,” Zain replied, placing his belongings on the table. He switched on the television and sank into the sofa, looking effortless and handsome in his mirror-finished shirt and fitted jeans.

“Come, sit here, breathe for two minutes — then we’ll make coffee,” he said, glancing at her.

“Aren’t you going to see what’s in this?” Nazli pointed toward the gift packet.

“Oh yes!” Zain reached for it, untying the ribbon and opening the perfume box.

“Thank you, Nazli, but this wasn’t necessary,” he said, spraying a little on his neck. The fragrance filled the room. Nazli’s heart lifted — he had no idea she had sold her ring to buy that perfume. On her finger now glinted the imitation ring he had once given her.

She rose and wandered about the apartment, quietly admiring the interiors. The place was furnished like a lived-in home — fine crockery, art pieces, furniture that gleamed.

“This apartment is so beautiful — decorated with such lovely things,” she murmured.

“Imagine one day you come to live here with me forever,” Zain said dreamily.

Nazli was speechless. She didn’t know what to say — or whether to believe him.

“What’s wrong? Why are you quiet?” Zain asked.

“Zain, you know a dream isn’t what one sees while sleeping. A dream is what keeps one awake. Your love has stolen my sleep,” she said softly. “All this feels like a dream I’m afraid to wake from.”

Zain rose, came close, and said, “See, our marriage will happen for sure. And if not in this world, then in Paradise — if both of us earn it.”

Nazli turned away, looking out through half-open blinds where the sea waves shimmered in the distance. Zain followed, phone in hand.

“Let’s take a selfie,” he said, stepping beside her. His arm slipped around her shoulder. The camera clicked a few times. Even after switching it off, his hand remained there.

Nazli stepped back, startled, but he caught her hand, pressed it to his eyes, and kissed it gently. His closeness overwhelmed her. When his hands reached her face, she froze — breathless, uncertain whether to resist or surrender.

He leaned in and kissed her closed eyes.

Behind those eyes, suddenly, she saw Javaid’s face — stern, fatherly — and she opened them wide.

“Zain… no!” she whispered, struggling to free herself. But his grip was strong. She pushed him away at last and stepped back, trembling.

Zain, expecting this, only shrugged. “What happened?”

“This is not right, Zain,” she said, steadying her breath and sinking onto the sofa.

“Don’t you love me?” he asked, as if her love granted him permission.

“I do, but that doesn’t justify such acts. Love isn’t an excuse for sin,” Nazli said firmly.

“You’re confused, Nazli — you don’t know how far love should go,” Zain said, watching her intently.

“Love doesn’t mean crossing every limit. That’s for people of loose morals, and I’m not one of them,” Nazli replied, her voice trembling yet resolute.

“Nazli, we love each other and we’ll be married,” Zain insisted.

“Marriage exists only in our imagination — nowhere else,” Nazli said bitterly. “Falling in love may be natural, but meeting like this isn’t right. I always knew this wasn’t good — that’s why I resisted dating.”

Zain sat down beside her, defeated.

“There’s a difference between lust and love, Zain. I want us to be proud of each other one day — not ashamed. If I give in today, won’t you think I’ve done the same before with someone else?”

“You’ll always have honour in my eyes,” Zain murmured.

“But that honour is something I’ve built myself — and it can vanish in seconds,” she said.

“I’ve seen girls who think love excuses everything,” she continued. “They go on dates, cross lines, and later cry that they’ve sinned. I don’t want to be one of them.”

“According to you, even meeting me is wrong. Maybe tomorrow it’ll all seem fine,” Zain said mockingly.

“Yes, but *this* will never be fine,” Nazli said.

“Acts? Oh, come on, Nazli — this is love! How can it be wrong?”

“But to me, it *is* a sin — a very big sin!” she said clearly.

Silence settled between them.

Nazli stood, picked up her bag, and moved toward the door. Zain followed, picking up her gift and his wallet, and opened the door for her.

At that moment, the elevator doors opened — and Huma stepped out.

Her eyes went first to Nazli, not Zain. The look she gave her was cold, piercing — like a blade.

✦✦✦

To Huma, Nazli was not merely a girl—she was a serpent, beautiful and poisonous, who had wrapped her coils around Zain’s life. One glance told her everything she needed to know. Huma removed her sunglasses and pushed them up into her hair, her expression tightening into polished contempt.

“Hello, Mom!” Zain greeted her quickly. A faint, flustered “Hello” escaped Nazli’s lips.

“Yes,” Huma answered curtly.

“We were just coming down,” Zain said in a tone of studied calm, as though nothing about this encounter was unusual.

“Aren’t you going to introduce me?” Huma asked, her voice dangerously steady, her eyes never leaving Nazli.

“Oh yes, Mom — this is Nazli, my very good friend. Nazli, this is my mom,” Zain said quickly.
Nazli gave a hesitant smile — one that Huma did not return. Her expression remained cold, her stillness heavy with disdain.

Nazli felt suddenly small beneath that gaze. She lowered her eyes, wishing to vanish.

“This introduction is incomplete, Zain. Come inside — I want to speak in detail with your *very good friend*,” Huma said sharply.

Zain recognized the tone — the same that turned walls into ice. He knew the confrontation was unavoidable. Without protest, he followed his mother inside.

Huma placed her handbag on the sofa and sat down with measured grace. Zain sat beside her. He placed the perfume gift Nazli had brought on the side table — forgotten already. Nazli lingered near the door, unsure what to do. Her fingers twisted the ring on her hand — the ring Zain had once given her. After a moment of unbearable silence, she sat down on the edge of another sofa.

“No need to sit,” Huma said, her voice slicing through the room. Nazli rose instantly, like a servant reprimanded by her mistress. Her heart pounded in humiliation.

“Have you come here only with Zain, or have you been to our Defence house too? Did Zain show you that house?” Huma asked, her tone dripping scorn.

“No, I have never been there,” Nazli replied faintly, her voice barely audible, her forehead beaded with nervous sweat.

“Good. Excellent,” Huma said with a cruel smile. Nazli wanted to flee. She looked once at Zain — but he sat motionless, eyes lowered.

Huma’s eyes fell upon Nazli’s hand. “Is this the ring Zain gave you?”

At those words, Zain’s eyelids closed for two long seconds. He realized instantly how she had discovered the truth. He shot Nazli a warning glance.

“Well? Answer me — is this the ring Zain gave you?” Huma demanded, her tone rising.

“Yes! No — Zain didn’t give me any ring,” Nazli lied bravely, voice trembling. Zain exhaled quietly, relieved.

Huma studied her face for a long moment, eyes narrowed.

“Where do you live?” she asked, her tone cold and deliberate.

“Nazimabad,” Nazli answered, standing stiffly.

“What does your father do?”

“He has a furniture shop,” she said simply.

From those few words, Huma instantly measured the distance between them — social, financial, and moral. Nazli’s refined looks could easily have passed for high-class beauty, but her origins betrayed her.

“Nazimabad is far. You must have come by bus?” Huma’s voice mocked, every syllable sharp.

“I came from college,” Nazli replied quietly. Zain’s continued silence felt more unbearable than his mother’s cruelty.

“Yes, I can see that — you’re still in uniform. Your parents must think you’re sitting in college right now,” Huma said, twisting the knife with another lash of sarcasm.

Nazli remained silent, too humiliated to defend herself.

“Do you have shame, honour, modesty? You wear a scarf, yet roam about with a boy like this,” Huma spat. Nazli’s eyes brimmed with tears; she glanced helplessly at Zain again — but he did not lift his gaze.

“Or perhaps living in a Defence apartment and sitting in big cars has made you bold? Tell me, have you ever sat in a car like Zain’s before? No, of course not,” Huma sneered.

“How long have you known Zain?” she pressed, her voice rising slightly.

“Mom, let’s go home. I’ll tell you the rest later,” Zain intervened, standing abruptly. He knew this needed to end before it turned crueller.

“I don’t trust a word you say, Zain. I have much to ask you,” Huma shot back.

“Mom, please, not here. Let’s go.” Zain’s voice trembled with restrained anger.

Nazli’s tears finally spilled over. She stood, twisting her hands together.

“Aunty, you must have some misunderstanding,” she said softly, lips dry.

“Shut up! I’m not your *aunty*. Leave this instant,” Huma shouted, her voice echoing through the room.

Nazli immobilized, staring from Huma to Zain. But Zain — her Zain — turned his eyes away.

“Didn’t you hear me? Get out! And if you meet my son again, it will be very bad for you,” Huma said icily.

Nazli picked up her bag slowly and walked out, her steps heavy, her humiliation burning like fire.

After she left, the silence between Huma and Zain turned into a storm.

“You’re not going anywhere alone again. Wherever you go, I’ll be with you,” Huma declared, standing up.

“All right then, let’s go,” Zain said quietly and walked toward the door, leaving Nazli’s gift unopened on the table.

Huma sent her driver to fetch the car and sat beside her son in the front seat, her anger simmering.

✦✦✦

Outside, Nazli stepped through the gate of the apartment complex, not knowing where to go or how to find a bus. Her head throbbed. She had never imagined her day with Zain would end in such ruin. Huma’s barbed words would haunt her forever — but more than that, Zain’s silence felt like betrayal.

Now Nazli knew that Huma despised her — but did Zain have the courage to face that hatred and still claim her? The question tore at her heart.

She stood on the roadside, tears streaming, trying to flag a rickshaw. Just then, Zain’s car roared past her. The wind from its speed lifted the dust from the road into her face, and for a moment she disappeared within it — a shadow swallowed by her own heartbreak.

That dust seemed to carry her pain itself: humiliation, helplessness, despair. As it settled, Zain’s car vanished from sight.

He didn’t look back. And she — she could not stop looking after him.

Her tears fell silently, one after another, like a prayer too broken to be heard.

✦✦✦

“Coming, coming — who is it?” Fareeda, Anita’s stepmother, called out as the bell rang again. Opening the gate, she froze at the sight of Amir and Anita standing there. Her voice faltered in greeting. Anita stepped forward.

“Is Baba at home?” she asked quickly.

“Yes,” Fareeda stammered, confused.

“Ma, this is Amir — my husband. Come in, Amir,” Anita said, introducing them.

Amir entered hesitantly. Fareeda, still stunned, closed the gate and followed them inside.

“Let’s go in,” Anita said nervously. They entered the TV lounge. Moments later, Ikram emerged from another room, Fareeda behind him.

“Why have you come? Who called you? Get out of my sight!” Ikram shouted the instant he saw them.

“Baba, I’ve come to apologize. Please forgive me,” Anita wept, folding her hands.

“Oh, your father is dead — and you are dead to me,” he barked.

“No, Father, don’t say that. For God’s sake, forgive me,” Anita cried, stepping forward.

“Uncle, please forgive us — we made a mistake,” Amir said timidly.

“No forgiveness here. Get out!” Ikram thundered, waving them toward the door.

“Baba, not a day passes that I don’t cry remembering you,” Anita sobbed.

“And not a day passes that I don’t curse my fate. You’ve killed me while I live,” Ikram said, his voice breaking.

“Everything will be fine, Father. My in-laws will come soon. We’ll take Anita back with honour. Just forgive us,” Amir pleaded.

“Dad, I won’t leave your feet until you forgive me,” Anita cried, falling to her knees.

“My parents have forgiven us already. Anita will stay with me honourably,” Amir added, his voice thick with emotion.

Fareeda’s lips tightened with disapproval, but Ikram’s anger wavered. After a moment, he sighed and placed a trembling hand on Anita’s shoulder, patting her head gently. Anita buried her face in his chest and sobbed like a child.

✦✦✦

After Mohsin left, a heavy stillness settled over Tazeen's parents' home. Athar Mirza had already instructed his lawyer to prepare the papers for *khula* — annulment. Within a week, Tazeen restored the same room she had once occupied before marriage; the only difference was that Kashan now slept beside her.

Seven years of storm had passed, yet the silence that followed felt even more unbearable. She endured the pain quietly, while Kashan absorbed her grief without understanding it. The torment of the past and the uncertainty of the future kept her awake through the long nights.

Though outwardly there was calm, an unspoken fear haunted her: would her parents' patience last until Kashan grew up? Her anxiety often broke into muffled sobs or sleepless vigils. In front of her parents she felt guilty, and at times she even made *them* feel guilty for what she had suffered.

Bilqees could not reconcile herself to the idea that her daughter — still so young — would now live as a divorced woman. Some fragile hope lingered in her that Mohsin might yet be persuaded, that reconciliation was still possible. Mohsin's mother thought much the same, and one morning she called Tazeen's parents.

Athar happened to answer.

"Which household doesn't have quarrels, Athar Bhai?" came Mohsin's mother's voice, tremulous yet deliberate. "I've spoken to Mohsin; he's quick-tempered, yes, but not wicked at heart. I worry more for Tazeen and Kashan than for him. Mohsin is a man — he can remarry someday — but for Tazeen it will be hard to marry again with a child."

Her tone bore sympathy, yet beneath it lay a veiled threat that made Athar's jaw tighten.

"Why should Tazeen stay alone with the child? That child belongs to Mohsin as well. You should take Kashan," Athar said bluntly.

Tazeen, hearing her son's name, drew near to the doorway. Kashan, too, caught the word *Kashan* and froze. The thought of being sent to his father filled him with a wordless terror.

"Look, brother," Mohsin's mother continued, "I say this act — divorce — is among those most disliked by God. I've tried to counsel Mohsin; he gets angry easily, but he's

not bad inside. I'm only worried about Tazeen and the child. Mohsin may remarry, but Tazeen with a boy will face hardship."

"At God's court there are many deeds your son has done — and still does — that are far more disliked," Athar replied, his voice rising, controlled yet scalding. "For seven years Tazeen hid his misdeeds so disgrace would not reach you. After my last talk with him I realized he will never change. Disrespecting a woman is in his blood. I will not discuss him further — and certainly not the child. It was Mohsin himself who told me to send Kashan to an orphanage. Tell me, whose mind is diseased then — mine or your son's?"

He ended the call abruptly, his hand shaking slightly as he set down the receiver.

Tazeen, standing behind him, felt no shock. She had long grown used to Mohsin's cruelty.
Bilqees, however, burst into tears.

But the one who would remember those words forever was Kashan. The bitter exchange carved itself into his young memory, echoing there for a lifetime. The image of his father faded, replaced by confusion and hurt.

"Papa, are they really asking for Kashan?" Tazeen asked softly, her voice taut with dread.

"No — I just said that," Athar answered, looking away.

"Papa, I can't live without him. Everything I endured was for his sake," Tazeen said, unable to believe him.

"I was only teasing them, daughter," Athar reassured her quickly. "I know you can't live without him — and he can't without you. Mohsin's family gave no sign of reconciliation; their call was a formality, nothing more. Don't worry."

Tazeen exhaled, forcing a small smile. "I'm not worried now. I'm safe, Papa — and Kashan is safe."

"May God keep you happy, Tazeen. But for parents to witness such things in a grown daughter's life is never easy," Bilqees murmured after a long silence.

"Mother, I too cannot bear to see my child suffer at my age," Tazeen answered gently.

"Enough now, Bilqees," Athar interjected softly. "I don't condemn Tazeen's decision — I admire her courage. When two people can no longer live in peace, our faith itself allows separation. Let us speak of something else."

“Mama!” Kashan’s small voice came from the other side of the room.

“Yes, my son,” Tazeen replied, brushing her hair before the mirror.

“Nano said on the phone they would take Kashan along. I will not go to Papa.”

At his words, her hand froze mid-stroke.

“No, my dear, you’re not going anywhere. You’ll stay with Mama. From now on, we’ll live here — together,” she said, turning to him tenderly.

“Mama, what is an orphanage?”

“Why?” she asked quickly.

She understood at once — the child had overheard Athar’s conversation and stored it, word for word, in his mind. Kashan was sharper and more sensitive than most children; qualities that made her proud yet often frightened her.

“Papa said to send me there,” he said innocently.

“No, no, he didn’t, my son. Could it ever happen that I’d let you go anywhere? Tell me, how would Mama live without you?”

Tazeen knelt before him, gathering him into her arms, whispering broken reassurances.

“Nano also said they would send me to Papa.”

“No, my son, no. Could anyone ever separate you from Mama? Nano was only joking. You mustn’t worry — Mama is always with her boy.”

Tears welled in Tazeen’s eyes. Her son’s questions, his frightened little heart, always weakened her. She wanted him to grow into a whole man — steady, unscarred — yet already she could see confusion taking root where innocence should have been.

She knew she must one day pull him out of those tangles and teach him how to live fully.
But she also knew that the memories which had taken hold inside Kashan — the echoes of anger, the fragments of fear — would never truly leave him.

✦✦✦

Zain and Arsalan sat together on the sofa directly opposite Afzal and Huma. Huma had still not emerged from her tempest of anger and agitation. She had already repeated, word for word, her entire meeting and conversation with Nazli—colouring

it with exaggerations as she went. But when it came to Zain's deceit and blunders, she thought it wise to conceal them. Almost everything else she could endure; only one thing was unforgivable to her—that Zain had fallen under the spell of some unsuitable girl.

"You tell me, Zain—what is all this about?" Afzal found it proper to begin the conversation with a direct question.

"The girl you met," Zain began, "I have neither any love affair with her, nor was I out on a date. She's an old classmate of mine and Arsalan's. She no longer studies with us, but she's in love with a boy and asked for my help. Nazli's family won't agree to their marriage, so the two planned to run away and wed in secret. Today they had decided to perform the *nikah* quietly, and Nazli came to my apartment with her fiancé to make the preparations—but he backed out at the last moment, perhaps under family pressure, and left her."

Huma and Afzal listened, though disbelief lingered in their faces.

"Dad, my only fault is that I tried to help Nazli by arranging her *nikah* in my apartment. Arsalan was supposed to come by too. Tell me yourself—if I were involved with any girl, what problem would I have admitting it to you? You already know about my girlfriends. If you want, ask Arsalan—right, Arsalan?"

Arsalan glanced once at Zain, who, despite reluctance, parted his lips. "Zain is right," he said quietly. "He really has been helping Nazli for some time."

"And not only that, Dad," Zain continued, "I even lent her money. But when she couldn't return it—after borrowing several times—I stopped helping her financially."

When Zain finished, Arsalan felt an urge to strangle him for lying so flawlessly. With his display of innocence and helplessness, Zain could have outdone any actor. Arsalan stared at the wall; deceit hung so heavy in the air that he could hardly breathe.

"All right, forget it. Whatever happened is done. But your studies must not suffer over such matters." Afzal chose to end the affair there, glancing toward Huma for agreement.

"Of course. May I go now?" Zain let out a long sigh as he spoke. His web of lies had succeeded completely, and a secret satisfaction glimmered behind his calm face.

Huma, for her part, could not scold Zain before Afzal. She had always tried to build a spotless image of him before her husband—and she would not let that image shatter today.

Afzal's phone rang; taking the call, he stepped outside. At once, Zain and Arsalan seized the chance to escape the room. They had barely turned toward the door when Huma's sharp voice cut through the air behind them.

"Zain, what was the matter with that ring you bought from the jeweller's shop?"

At her words, Zain drew in a deep breath, as though unprepared. "Mama, that ring was for Kareem. He asked me to get it for some girlfriend of his in the village. He helps me with a lot—I couldn't refuse. If you like, call him now and ask, but for God's sake, don't humiliate the poor man!"

With calm confidence, Zain sealed the final door of doubt in Huma's mind, locking it as though forever.

"Oh really? So now even Kareem has started having such whims." Huma's tone dripped with sarcasm.

"Please don't say anything to him," Zain replied smoothly, posing before her with the air of a saint. He and Arsalan left. Huma decided to confront him about money matters later. For now, she was satisfied that the issue of Nazli was settled.

✦✦✦

"How very shameful," Arsalan said the moment he stepped into Zain's room.

"Why, what happened?" Zain asked, pretending not to understand what he was referring to.

"What happened? Be grateful that nothing happened between you and Nazli—that she slipped through your hands." Arsalan's tone carried biting disdain.

"One who can deceive his own parents and keep them in the dark—what more can be expected of him?" he added with contempt.

"Man, it's my life. Don't drive me crazy." Zain's voice was careless, almost amused.

"Today was the last time I lied for you. I swear, never again will I stand by you in deceit. You drag me into your sins, and I have no wish to carry that burden." Arsalan's words came firm, resolute.

“Fine, don’t. But at least for today, let me thank you. Be glad that Mom didn’t mention the bank withdrawals in front of Dad,” Zain replied, still wearing that infuriating half-smile.

“Zain, what do you even gain from all this?” Arsalan asked, studying him closely, hoping to glimpse some trace of shame.

“Freedom! My own life, on my own terms. I hate restrictions. I hate being stopped or controlled. But to live as I want, I do many things that keep others satisfied. For every wrong step, I craft a justification.” Zain spoke as though explaining a personal philosophy—a dark manifesto that excused his every deceit.

“But what freedom do you lack? What’s denied to you?” Arsalan asked.

“The freedom not to sit through lectures,” Zain said with a wink, mocking.

“You spoke so ill of Nazli. You’ve ruined her reputation entirely,” Arsalan said, his voice softening with pity for her.

“What should I have done? Taken all the blame myself? Besides, it’s not as if I’ll have any relation with her now. From today, everything between us is over. She’s become too serious for me—I only realized that today.” Zain’s tone turned cold, almost dismissive.

“Why? What did she do?” Arsalan asked, incredulous.

“She’s a girl of old-fashioned ideas. I always knew she wanted something permanent—a lifelong bond—but I’m not made for that. She’s overly emotional, lost in dreams, wants to marry me, keeps imposing her restrictions. And I hate restrictions.”

“But what harm would there be if you did marry her? She’s a good girl—beautiful, decent. It’s good that she wants to keep the relationship honourable,” Arsalan said earnestly.

“Am I insane—to invite my mother’s wrath for her? My mother could never tolerate any girl’s influence over me. And, most importantly, I never loved Nazli. It was just time pass—and now even that is over.”

Zain delivered his verdict like a judge passing sentence.

“Then why did you keep feeding her hopes all this time?” Arsalan asked, though he already knew there would be no real answer.

“Didn’t I just tell you? It was time pass. Her face had a charm. She could talk well—but she’s of no use to me now. I never loved her, though I said I did. And now I don’t even feel like hearing her voice. Look—over a hundred missed calls, countless messages. But I don’t want to answer.”

He tossed his phone toward Arsalan, its screen filled with Nazli’s name.

“You’re being cruel,” Arsalan said quietly. “That girl’s too sensitive.”

“Nothing will happen. She’ll cry for a few days, then she’ll recover. That’s best for both of us. You don’t understand—Mom will make sure I never see her again. I can’t risk more trouble, especially after the story I’ve told.”

Zain’s every move was calculated. He played both hero and villain in his own story—and Arsalan could never reconcile the two sides of him.

Listening to him, Arsalan almost found the logic practical—Zain’s fear of his parents seemed real enough—but his deceit, his callousness toward Nazli, filled Arsalan with disgust.
Zain was a paradox—sharp yet shallow, cunning yet hollow.

After sitting for a while, Arsalan rose and left.

Zain scrolled through Nazli’s endless messages, then quietly removed the SIM card from his phone and replaced it with another. After that, he lay back and slept peacefully—never realizing that he had stolen from Nazli the sleep of many nights and the peace of many years to come.

✦✦✦

The weather was cloudy and beautiful. Not a single ray of sunlight had pierced the sky since morning. To Nazli, that grey stillness felt identical to the condition of her own heart—no gleam of hope anywhere, only a weight of sorrow ready to burst like rain-laden clouds.

She had not slept all night. As always, anxiety first devoured her appetite, then her sleep.
Yet Nazli cared neither for food nor for rest. Her instinct kept warning her that a great storm was about to overturn her life. Despite her countless calls and messages, there was no reply from Zain. When his phone remained switched off, her worry rose beyond control. Early in the morning she went to college and, in her distress, sat on the steps before the ground where she and Zain had once met and talked every day.

She longed to run to his house, to knock at his door, to have him come out and speak to her—just once, only once. Surely some great trouble had befallen him because of her.
That thought—wrong as always—kept her alive.

Remembering Huma's tone and Zain's complete silence, she could not help feeling that some calamity had struck him. She knew little about his home, for he had never spoken of it. Nazli was overawed by his family's high status; she could not guess what such people considered serious or trivial. Her face was pale, her eyes hollow. When, two hours later, Sarah reached college, she came straight to her. Since yesterday Nazli had been trying to reach her but could not explain everything over the phone. Now, with Sarah and Falak beside her, she poured out the entire story from beginning to end—and then the tears began to fall.

"That's a terrible situation," Sarah said after listening.

"What will happen now, Sarah? What if Zain's parents don't agree?" That question haunted Nazli's mind.

"If they don't, he should convince them. If Zain truly loves you, he'll do everything possible to win them over," Falak reassured her.

But Nazli seemed untouched by their comfort. She sat staring blankly at the far edge of the ground.

"I feel as though his phone has been taken by his parents; otherwise he would have answered. He must be in trouble, Sarah. Last night I even thought—what if his parents read all my texts? When that thought came, I stopped sending more." Nazli tried to console herself with her own reasoning.

"Don't think Zain so innocent. I don't believe he's such an obedient child that he'd hand his phone to them," Sarah said bluntly.

"Things have gone very wrong, Sarah. You don't know how his mother spoke to me that day. Zain didn't say a word in my defense—he didn't even try to stop her—while she mocked and humiliated me so much." Nazli kept repeating the scene, again and again.

"Perhaps Zain explained everything later. Be patient, Nazli," Falak said softly.

"My mind is breaking apart with worry—I'm so distressed." Nazli's tears would not stop.

“Don’t cry so much, Nazli. I understand how you feel, but try to calm down. Until the truth comes out, don’t let bad thoughts consume you. Let’s go watch a movie today—maybe your mood will lighten. Fawad Khan’s new Indian film just released.” Sarah tried to distract her.

“No, I don’t want to watch anything. I think I’ll just go home,” Nazli replied wearily.

“Oh come on, Fawad’s in it—and Zain looks so much like him. When you see him, it’ll feel like seeing Zain,” Falak teased gently.

“Seeing him will make me miss Zain even more. There’ll be no peace. Until I’m free of these thoughts, I can’t enjoy anything. Just pray that everything turns out fine.” Tears brimmed again in her eyes.

Within a single day, her face had lost its freshness; anyone could tell she was in deep anguish.
After sitting there for a while, Falak and Sarah went to class. Nazli did not. She sat alone for some time, then decided to go home; she knew she could not concentrate in class. The final examinations were near, but for a brilliant student like Nazli, academic success mattered less now than success in the test of love. At the worst possible time, a harsh season had entered her life—and for the sake of her first youthful love, she was ready to forsake everything else. Everywhere she looked, she saw only Zain’s face. From walls and doors, a thousand Zains seemed to emerge toward her. In every vision of the world, there was only one image—Zain. Zain, who would never look back at her again.

A week passed, then four more days, but she could not reach him. She stopped going to college, telling her family she was preparing for exams, and locked herself in her room. Prayers filled her nights and days, yet peace eluded her. Sarah and Falak searched for a way to help, but Zain never re-inserted the SIM through which they had once spoken.

After many days, Nazli chose the last possible way to reach him.

✦✦✦✦✦✦

It was one of the saddest evenings of December—and sadder still was Tazeen herself. Before sunset she had gone to the park with Kashan. It was the most beautiful park in the area: stout men jogging beside their equally plump wives, young people trying to melt away excess fat, children laughing near the swings while their parents watched and smiled.

Tazeen had brought Kashan there; he was playing with the other children. Contrary to her expectation, the park seemed unusually quiet today—or perhaps Tazeen was simply too lost in thought to notice the world around her. She glanced at her wristwatch to see the date: the 27th. December. And the year—1998. It was the date on which Tazeen had been divorced from Mohsin, and Kashan had received the inheritance of a broken home.

That very morning she had gone with Athar Mirza to the lawyer's office, where, before Mohsin himself, she signed the papers of *khula*. All matters had been settled. Kashan's custody would remain with Tazeen until he turned eighteen; afterward, Mohsin could claim that right if he wished. But she knew he never would.

She felt neither regret nor relief. There was no sorrow in parting from Mohsin—only a mute ache: why had life chosen this path for her? Despite being a cheerful, educated, refined daughter of good parents, she had become a symbol of misfortune. None of her virtues had ever been visible to her husband, and she never truly understood why. Despite her patience and effort, she had failed to soften his rudeness or temper. But when she saw their loveless marriage beginning to scar her child, she decided to walk away from that tree whose shade burned hotter than sunlight.

She watched Kashan laughing on the slide, yet inside her ears echoed the voices of the past.

"What are you doing here alone in the basement?"

Hearing Mohsin's voice behind her, she had turned from her painting, startled.

"Mohsin, look—I painted this. Tell me, how is it?"

Her hands were smeared with colour. She had been working secretly for days on a landscape, and today it was almost complete. It was her first painting since their marriage two months ago.

"What are you doing here alone?"

Mohsin looked once at the painting, then ignored it completely, repeating the question.

"I was painting—I thought I'd surprise you."

She smiled lovingly.

"Tell me, how do you like it?"

"Did you take my permission for this?"

His tone suddenly hardened; she blinked, uncomprehending.

“Permission? For what?”

“To come into the basement and do all this.”

“Permission? Why would I need permission in my own house? What’s wrong with you, Mohsin?”

For the first time, she felt afraid of him.

“What’s wrong with me? Do I look mad—or have I said something foolish?”

Tazeen sensed an unfamiliar cruelty in his face.

“Didn’t you just say ‘what’s wrong with me’? Didn’t you?”

His voice was rising.

“Mohsin, I only asked—do I now need to ask you before I come here or paint?”

“Yes. Without my permission, you’ll do nothing. And what insolent tone is this you’re using with me?”

He stepped closer. They now stood face-to-face beside the canvas.

“What insolence? I’m only answering you.”

Her throat was dry, her voice trembling. The next instant, Mohsin snatched a tin of black paint and flung it across the canvas.

The beautiful painting drowned in darkness; black paint spread like tar across a road. Tazeen stood frozen, unable to believe her eyes. Within moments the canvas became a blackboard of ruin— and it was as if, in that same instant, the same black paint had been spilled across her fate.

“After today, you’ll never speak to me insolently again—understand?”

He waved a warning hand and walked away. Tazeen was too stunned to grasp what had happened. That was the first veil lifted from Mohsin’s ugliness. After that, one by one, all the veils fell, and she was humiliated again and again by his hands. From that day, she never painted again. Mohsin never mentioned the incident either. Worse things followed, until that memory seemed trivial. Yet sitting in the park today, she remembered that black paint— for her own life’s painting now seemed drenched in the same darkness. She stood in the thick shadow of loneliness, in the prime of her

youth. She had become one of those unfortunate women who, though married, never become their husband's choice of heart.

"Mama, did you see how fast I came down the slide?"

Kashan ran to her, jolting her out of her reverie.

"Good," she managed a faint smile.

"Mama, are you crying?" No one noticed her tears as keenly as Kashan. Even when she herself didn't feel them, he always saw. Startled, she brushed her cheeks quickly.

"No—no, not at all."

But her palms came away wet. Kashan fell silent and walked back toward the playground, glancing at her again and again.

After he left, Tazeen looked around. Couples were walking together, smiling and laughing.
They were mostly married couples—people who had found companionship. She had never walked in a park with Mohsin; she did not even know what such closeness felt like. The laughing wives glowed with ease in their husbands' company. Tazeen felt herself shrink among them. She was about to become, in the world's eyes, the worst kind of woman— a divorced one: stubborn, temperamental, arrogant, liberal— and countless other labels awaited her. Bilqees worried not only for her daughter's future but also for what people would say. Tazeen's mind churned with thoughts of fate. When she had chosen this path, she had felt strong; but today she was hollow with self-pity. Why had all this happened to her? She knew women plainer than herself whose husbands adored them, uneducated wives who ruled their homes with tenderness, sharp-tongued women whose husbands still sang their praises—perhaps all those women were simply luckier than she. Despite all her virtues, she now stood defeated, unable to explain why her marriage had failed. Sometimes no wisdom, no patience, can save a bond— especially with a man like hers. The canvas of her life had once been painted carefully, each colour chosen with thought. The picture had once seemed perfect— until fate splashed black across it. She felt that darkness upon her face; she rubbed her cheeks—and then the tears came in streams.

Kashan had just climbed the slide's ladder, but when he saw his mother wiping her face, he froze. From behind, another child pushed him impatiently; the next moment he slipped down the slide and fell hard to the ground.

Tazeen saw him fall and, terrified, ran to him. He lay still, blood streaming from his forehead, his little face red with it.

✦✦✦✦✦✦

“Get up!”

“What is it?”

“Get up—quickly, get up!”

It was Arsalan, who had entered Zain’s room and was shaking him violently awake on that Saturday morning.

Zain found Arsalan’s early intrusion utterly unbearable.

“What’s the matter, man?”

Half-lifting his head from beneath the blanket, Zain asked once, then turned over, pulling the cover higher and trying to fall asleep again.

“Oh brother, get up! There’s something important—hurry!”

Arsalan snatched the blanket away.

For a few moments Zain lay still, refusing to move, then reluctantly opened his eyes and sat up.

“What is it? What nonsense is this?” he asked, his tone filled with irritation and boredom.

“You’re sleeping in peace while—never mind, there’s something I need from you. Come with me, freshen up quickly.”

Arsalan glanced at the clock as he spoke.

Zain could never really refuse Arsalan; he owed him too many favours to protest.

“What’s so urgent at seven in the morning? It’s Saturday, man—no classes today.”

He also glanced lazily toward the clock.

“Do as I said—get up, get ready, and come.”

Arsalan shot him a stern look.

Zain could not make sense of it, yet there was something in Arsalan’s tone—something unusually grave. Otherwise, Arsalan had never behaved like this.

Thinking so, he rose, stretched, and went to change his clothes.

Half an hour later, Zain sat in Arsalan's car, lighting a cigarette. He did not know where they were going but sat calmly, smoking, not even bothering to ask.

After some time, Arsalan parked in front of a Dunkin' Donuts outlet and motioned for Zain to step out.

"What—are we here for breakfast?"

Zain crushed the cigarette beneath his shoe and asked.

"Yes, come on," Arsalan replied briefly.

"Why so far? There are outlets near home too," Zain muttered, but Arsalan gave no answer.

The entire café was empty except for the staff; not a single customer occupied a seat. Arsalan went to the counter, placed an order, and asked to sit upstairs.

A waiter guided them to a table beside the windows on the first floor.

Zain leaned back, stretched his arms lazily, and pulled out his phone, scrolling idly through the screen.

Arsalan, meanwhile, kept glancing repeatedly at his watch.

After exactly fifteen minutes, the wait was over.

Climbing the staircase toward them was Nazli.

Zain's back faced the stairs, so he did not see her approach.

When she reached the table, Arsalan rose to greet her.

Zain noticed Arsalan stand up, puzzled— and the next instant, Nazli was standing right beside him.

Zain's eyes widened.

In her white churidar trousers and light blue kameez, a dupatta draped gracefully over her head and around her neck, small shining studs in her ears, and the ring—Zain's ring—on her finger, she looked breathtaking even in simplicity. Yet her face was pale, her eyes swollen red from crying.

"Hello, Nazli! How are you?" Arsalan greeted.

Nazli merely nodded.

“Zain!”

Her breath trembled, yet she smiled faintly upon seeing him.

Zain could not utter a single word. He sat, dumbfounded, staring first at her, then at Arsalan.

“I think you two should talk. I’ll be back shortly—I just have a small errand. The order should arrive soon,” Arsalan said to Nazli, then glanced once at Zain’s shifting expression before leaving.

He handed the waiter a thousand-rupee note with strict instructions that no other customers should come upstairs for the time being.

Nazli’s eyes remained fixed upon Zain.

She placed her handbag softly on the table and sat down across from him, in the seat where Arsalan had been.

Seeing his silence and blank face, she assumed Zain must be terribly worried. His unshaven face—though merely a fashion choice—seemed to her a reflection of distress.

“Zain, what has happened? I know all this trouble came because of me. Believe me, I’ve been so restless—I couldn’t sleep for nights. When I couldn’t reach you, I…”

Her voice broke; her throat tightened with tears.

“I haven’t slept for so many nights, Zain. I couldn’t find any way to talk to you. Then at last I thought of one thing—that I should ask Arsalan for help. I messaged him on Facebook, took his number, begged him to make you meet me somehow. Look, I forgot even to thank him! When I saw you, I lost control.”

A trembling smile crossed her tear-streaked face. She spoke in scattered, breathless sentences, while Zain kept looking away—sometimes at her, sometimes at his hands, sometimes out the window. He searched inwardly for words that could destroy her love yet leave him blameless.

“Zain, I know your family is watching you now—where you go, whom you meet, everything. I knew only Arsalan could help me. Your mother wasn’t happy seeing us together, was she? I understood that. You know, I called and messaged you so many times, but you never replied. I couldn’t study at all; exams are near.”

Nazli wanted to lay her entire torment bare before him. With tangled, broken thoughts, she went on speaking. Her eyes brimmed with tears, ready to fall any moment. She did not even realize that her words had no effect on Zain.

“Zain, I know you’re under a lot of stress too. What are your parents saying now? They must be angry. But they don’t know how important our relationship is. You would never want—”

Zain interrupted.

“Relationship? What do you mean?”

Fixing his gaze on her, he said coldly, “I was only good friends with you. I’ve always said I don’t understand all this love and romance business.”

Nazli felt as though she had been pushed from a moving train. The ground slipped beneath her feet; time itself stopped. The words she had just heard—could they truly have come from Zain?

“Zain…” her voice trembled like a whisper.

“Yes. I mean, I never understood your state—getting upset over small things, staying awake all night crying. I’ve never been able to grasp such emotions. I don’t know what you think or in what dream-world you live—but to me, you’ve been nothing more than a good friend.”

He feigned ignorance with cruel perfection.

“Zain, I love you—and you don’t need to tell me that today. I told you that long ago. And you—you loved me too, you said it many times. Have you forgotten?”

“For God’s sake, Nazli, I never confessed love. I’ve always respected you—as a friend. You were the one who kept bringing up love; I never understood it.”

Nazli stared at him, wide-eyed, speechless.

“Please understand, Nazli. I never had such feelings. I do respect you, yes—but as a good friend only. Never as love. And you must realize that now.”

He withdrew himself from everything with calm, shameless deceit.

“You’re saying this because your parents pressured you, aren’t you? Tell me, Zain!”

“No—not at all. Please, now understand. There are many girls like you in my life, all my friends, and I feel nothing more for any of them. They don’t misunderstand me—but you alone keep claiming to love me.”

“Then did you never make me believe you loved me too?”

“You always took my words wrongly.”

Nazli went silent for a moment, then cried out like a wounded being.

“Wrongly? You used to call me day and night. Your loving messages—I still have every one saved! What did I misunderstand? You said you couldn’t spend a day without talking to me, that you’d never leave me, that no one had ever loved you the way I did. You said all that, Zain—you did! And now you act as though all this time I’ve been in some one-sided illusion?”

Her world—her life, her love—was crumbling before her eyes.

“I may have said it—sure, but not now. Now I’m avoiding you, because I’ve realized you’ve taken everything wrongly and are making life difficult for both of us.”

His throat tightened, yet he spoke with deliberate cruelty.

“Avoiding me? You’re avoiding me, Zain?”

It struck her like a bomb. She felt a wave of humiliation wash over her.

“Yes, avoiding. That’s why I turned off my number. Because I no longer wish to continue anything between us. Nazli, when you feel someone is avoiding you, you should never disturb them again.”

He hammered the final nail into her coffin, rose, and walked away—leaving her staring blankly, tears frozen upon her face.

For some time she could not even comprehend what had happened. Then quietly, she stood, wiped her cheeks, and left without a second’s pause. She left the shattered pieces of her heart right there.

At the door, she met Arsalan coming up. From her face, he understood everything.

“Thank you, Arsalan,” she said, and walked past swiftly.

“Did you meet Zain?” he asked quickly.

“Arsalan, the person I just met wasn’t Zain—he was someone else. I don’t know who he was.”

A bitter smile crossed her face, though her eyes betrayed her tears.

She turned and left.

Arsalan said nothing.

He watched her walk away—away from deceit and betrayal.

She kept walking down the road, not taking a rickshaw, not turning back. He couldn't understand why she went in the opposite direction of her home. Had she forgotten her way—or did she no longer wish to go back? She disappeared from sight at last, walking fast, swallowed by the distance. The sky above, filled with dark clouds, thundered as if in protest against her betrayal— but Nazli heard nothing: not the rolling thunder, not the rhythm of the sudden rain, not even the traffic's roar around her. Her hearing seemed gone— the only sound she could still hear was the echo of Zain's cruel words. Walking through the rain, her entire being was drenched. Her tears mingled with the rain, and no one could tell which fell more—the sky's sorrow or hers. When she had first met Zain, she had lost herself in the magic of his words; today she lost herself again— but now, in their poison. The difference was this: today, along with hearing, she had lost her capacity to think. Zain's words tormented her, cutting deep; and she walked, directionless, away from home, away from all. Like a leaf torn from its branch, tossed helplessly in the wind— she drifted, unaware of where her steps led.

Hours passed. A car honked sharply beside her, then stopped close. Perhaps it had been honking for long— but Nazli only heard it when the person inside lowered the window and called out to her.

✦✦✦✦

At half past three in the night, Nazli's eyes fluttered open— and she sat up abruptly, startled. Around her lingered the same atmosphere she had felt forty minutes earlier, before drifting into that shallow sleep. The room was silent, yet the ceiling fan above hummed its familiar, tuneless rhythm. A faint glow from the night bulb stretched across the walls, pooling softly in the corners. Beside her, Sana slept soundly, her breathing deep and even, while sleep itself had wandered miles away from Nazli's restless eyes. It seemed to her that this night had stretched into an entire century—a night that refused to end, a dawn that would not come.

A storm raged within her heart and mind, silent yet unrelenting. For the past eight hours, she had lain in her bed, feigning a headache. Each time she closed her eyes, the scenes of her life unfurled before her like a film— changing frame after frame, each one more unbearable than the last. Whenever she opened her eyes, the dreadful climax of that same film tormented her even more. So she would close them again— and the film would begin once more. Its beginning had been beautiful— the

first scene, that night when someone had stopped her from going home; and its final scene, when she was once again returning home— but had lost her way. Tonight she wished that same person would stop her again, the one who had stopped her in that first scene— but instead of stopping her this time, he had left her standing alone in the middle of the road.

And yet—someone *had* stopped her indeed. Nazli suddenly remembered— a car had pulled up beside her.

“Nazli!” Startled, she turned to her left, as though breaking free from a trance.

The car stood idling beside her, headlights piercing through the rain. When the man stepped out and began walking toward her, she recognized him instantly.

It was Professor Najeeb Dar.

As he approached, he looked at her the way one looks at someone disturbed in spirit— for she stood staring at him with empty, hollow eyes. He waved his hand gently before her face, as though testing whether she was conscious or not.

“Nazli, what are you doing here all alone at this hour?”

Nazli could find no words. She was about to speak when the professor asked again,

“You know, I had been watching from a distance— a girl walking right in the middle of the road, utterly unaware of her surroundings. Every driver swerved to avoid her and drove on. When I came closer, I thought to warn her to move aside— but I never imagined that it would be you.”

“Sir… I was just going home,” Nazli said—the only answer she could muster.

“Walking home like this, in the rain? You should take a taxi or a rickshaw at this hour,” Professor Najeeb said, still trying to make sense of what he saw.

“Where do you live?”

“In Nazimabad,” Nazli replied quietly.

“So, were you here for some work? College is off today, isn’t it?”

“Why would I go to college today?” she asked in return.

“I thought since it’s nearby, you might have come for some reason,” he said.

“Sir, what place is this?”

Nazli's voice trembled; her senses seemed to be returning slowly— as though the effect of anaesthesia were wearing off.

"Defence," Professor Najeeb replied calmly. He was beginning to suspect that something was wrong with her mind. He studied her face carefully.

"How can that be possible?" Nazli said in astonishment, looking right and left in disbelief.

"What do you mean, how can it be possible?" asked the professor.

"Sir, this can't be Defence!"

Nazli's eyes widened in confusion as she gazed around, the rain shimmering faintly on the empty road.

"Nazli, are you feeling all right?"

The professor's doubt had now turned into certainty— Nazli clearly was not in her full senses.

"Sir, I never came here. I came from home in a rickshaw," she said, naming the area where she had met Zain.

"But that place is quite far from here! How on earth did you reach this side?" the professor asked in surprise.

"Sir, I didn't come here... I don't even know how I got here," Nazli said with a sinking heart,
as though referring to something far deeper than her words implied. Unwillingly, tears welled up in her eyes. The professor, watching her with concern, could not ignore the sorrow glimmering there. Meanwhile, passing cars slowed, their drivers turning to stare curiously at the young girl and the older man standing in the rain.

"Nazli, please get into my car. We can't talk standing here— we're blocking the traffic," the professor said gently. He had fully understood her fragile state.

At college, Professor Najeeb was known not only for his intellect but also his keen insight into human nature— he could read expressions and gestures with unsettling accuracy.

"Sir, I want to go home," Nazli said softly— perhaps informing him, perhaps protesting; even she could not tell.

She was utterly exhausted, her body heavy with the weariness that comes after hours of walking without purpose.

“For now, just sit in the car. I’m not taking you anywhere else. Let me arrange a taxi or a rickshaw for you— but you won’t find one nearby,” he explained, opening the car door for her. Without another word, Nazli sat inside. She was too drained to argue. Had she stood a little longer, she might have collapsed. She did not even realize that she had been walking aimlessly for nearly four hours. The professor turned the car toward the main road. Nazli, drenched to the bone, felt an odd mix of embarrassment and relief embarrassed to sit in her soaked clothes, yet comforted that her trembling legs could finally rest. The professor himself didn’t know how to ask what had happened to her. He drove in silence until they neared Nazli’s neighbourhood.

“Sir, you can stop here, please. My house is nearby— I’ll take a rickshaw from here. I’ve already troubled you enough. You came so far because of me,” Nazli said softly.

The professor nodded and stopped the car by the roadside.

“Thank you, sir,” she said, opening the door to step out.

“Nazli,” he called.

She turned before leaving.

“I don’t remember the exact words,” he said quietly, “but a famous writer once wrote— ‘For a faithful soul, love becomes a true biography; for the unfaithful, it is merely a pastime.’” In that single sentence, the professor seemed to lay Nazli’s entire life before her. Without knowing her story, without knowing Zain’s name or her heartbreak, he had reached its very root.

They say knowledge never goes to waste— and truly, even this brief encounter had left Nazli with a lesson. She gave him a faint, weary look, murmured goodbye, and stepped out of the car. For five minutes, his words echoed in her mind— and then, as always, she sank once more into her sea of sorrow. She returned home without eating, pretended a headache, and went to bed— but sleep would not come. Like a hesitant rain, tears kept streaming down her face. At half past three, once again she sat entangled in the whirlpool of memory and pain. Every word Zain had spoken seemed etched upon the walls, written into the very air. Each sentence wounded her more deeply than before. And then suddenly— for no reason at all— she dialled Sarah’s number.

The bell kept ringing— no one answered.

She tried again— still nothing.

Sleep was far from her; wakefulness, too, had abandoned her. She was suspended somewhere between the two— love's betrayal keeping her from rest, and yesterday's memories forbidding her to stay awake.

"I never understood your state— this worrying over small things, staying up all night crying... what is all this? For me, you've only ever been a good friend, Nazli—nothing more." Like the crack of a whip, his words lashed across her heart, and her closed eyes flew open once again.

✦✦✦✦

"The wound will have to be stitched," the doctor informed Tazeen.

Tazeen had brought Kashan—his small form drenched in blood—to the nearest hospital. She had her own car, so she reached quickly, though her hands trembled so violently that she could hardly grip the steering wheel. Panic throbbed through her veins like fever. One of the women from the park had accompanied her, sitting beside her to help in that hour of fear. Kashan's blood had kept flowing relentlessly; in desperation, Tazeen had torn a strip from her dupatta and bound it around his forehead as a makeshift bandage.

"Will these stitches leave a scar on Kashan's forehead?" she asked, her voice tight and breaking.

"There's no other way," the doctor replied. "The wound is deep. You'll have to wait outside for now. If the child becomes restless, we'll call you into the operation room."

The doctor hurried away. The paramedical staff had already carried Kashan into the small operating theatre adjoining the emergency ward.

"Don't worry, sister," said the middle-aged woman who had come with her from the park, speaking with practiced kindness. "Children often get hurt like this while playing." She introduced herself as Kiran Tauqeer.

"But it's my fault," Tazeen wept. "It happened because of me. I wasn't paying attention to him—I didn't take care of him."

"It's nothing like that. You're worrying too much. Call your husband—he should be here. You'll both feel stronger together."

At those words, Tazeen abruptly fell silent.

“A woman like you could never take care of a child. He fell, didn’t he? Whose thoughts were you lost in—the one you left behind?”

That voice from the past struck her like a slap. She ran a trembling hand across her face, as though wiping away invisible bruises.

“My husband—and this child’s father—is dead. I’ll call my father to come here.” Her tone had hardened, stripped of all softness.

Kiran looked at her in surprise. She hadn’t expected Tazeen to speak so coldly of her dead husband, or the father of her son. Tazeen rose and walked toward the reception desk while the woman remained seated, watching her with quiet unease.

“Papa, Kashan fell while playing—he’s hurt his head. Please come to the hospital,” she said briefly, giving the hospital’s name before ending the call.

When she asked the staff about Kashan’s condition, they told her he had stopped crying, though the stitching was still underway and the wound had been cleaned. From the edge of the restricted area she could glimpse her son lying on the small bed—his innocent face pale, his wide eyes searching for her, his lips void of a smile. Her heart filled with guilt. There was no one in the world she loved more than her son. Before Kashan, she had loved Mohsin—and from that love she had received nothing but humiliation and disregard. After Kashan’s birth, the emptiness of her life had been softened by the tenderness of motherhood; the ache for her husband’s affection had slowly faded. But when she realized that the shadows of her broken marriage were beginning to stretch over her child’s life, she had gathered the courage to make the boldest decision of her existence—to leave.

Standing there now, Tazeen made another decision: she would never look back. She would bury the wounds she had received, for remembering them would only pass the same pain into her son’s small heart—just as today’s wound had come to him through her own neglect.

✦✦✦

A short while later, Athar Mirza arrived at the hospital, accompanied by Tazeen’s brother, Imran, his only son.

Imran’s arrival was, as always, a surprise to his parents. He had returned from America that very evening with his family, bringing both delight and astonishment to Athar and Bilqees.

When he embraced his sister, Tazeen's cheeks grew wet—perhaps with joy, perhaps with sorrow. Imran could not tell which.

"Papa, this is Mrs. Tauqeer," Tazeen introduced the woman who had helped her. "She came with me from the park and helped a lot."

"Thank you very much," said Athar Mirza politely. "I'm sure Tazeen must have been very frightened."

"Oh, terribly!" Kiran said kindly. "I told her children get hurt like this all the time. Anyway, I'm glad your family's here now, so I'll take my leave."

Wishing them goodbye, she departed.

Soon after, a nurse appeared to inform them that four stitches had been done. The staff carried Kashan out in their arms and handed him gently to Tazeen. She gathered him to her chest and held him as though protecting him from every unseen harm.

Kashan, unlike most children, had shown quiet courage; through the entire procedure he had not cried out once. Perhaps he was already used to enduring pain deeper than this. After paying the hospital bill and collecting the prescribed medicines, they all left for home. Throughout the drive, Imran remained silent—and that silence weighed heavily upon Tazeen's heart. Athar, as always, was busy soothing his grandson. The driver had brought back Tazeen's car, so the entire family rode together. Kashan, worn out, fell asleep in his mother's lap. When they reached home, the house was alive with the laughter and running feet of children—Imran's wife Maria, their two sons, and their little daughter filled the air with chatter and energy.

"Thank God you're back! Is everything all right? What happened?" Bilqees asked anxiously, showering them with her familiar barrage of questions.

"Everything's fine," Athar replied reassuringly. "The boy just fell while playing—got a few stitches, that's all. God's mercy."

After greeting everyone, Tazeen carried Kashan to her bedroom and laid him gently in bed. She freshened up, washed her tear-stained face, and joined her parents, brother, and his family in the lounge.

"This sudden surprise visit! But I'm so glad you came," she said with a faint smile to Maria.

"Imran always surprises us with his arrivals," Bilqees added with a soft smile of her own.

“Both your children believe in giving surprises, Ammi,” Imran said lightly.

The remark, though spoken casually, erased the smiles from every face. Everyone understood the hidden sting—it pointed toward Tazeen’s sudden divorce.

“Yes... and every surprise, thankfully, brings happiness,” Athar said after a brief pause, his tone an attempt to smooth the air of discomfort.

The words, however, pierced Tazeen’s heart like a needle. She now knew that her brother did not approve of her decision to end her marriage.

“I’ll help Sameena in the kitchen,” she said quickly, referring to the maid. “No one’s eaten dinner yet, right?” And without waiting for a response, she walked toward the kitchen. Maria rose quietly and followed her.

As soon as they had left, Bilqees turned to her son.

“Imran, you shouldn’t have said that. Tazeen just got divorced today. She’s already heartbroken.”

“Ammi, you should have stopped her from taking such a step,” Imran replied curtly. “No matter how modern we become, in our society, a woman’s divorce is never seen as a good thing.”

“What we know, Imran, you don’t,” Athar said softly yet firmly. “So don’t judge until you know the truth.”

“It’s not just about what people think,” Imran argued. “How will she raise her son alone? Today’s accident was proof enough of that. Thank God it wasn’t something worse. She’s my little sister—I know how brave she is, but this is too much for her.”

“That was an accident,” Athar countered. “Your own children fall while playing too. Kashan fell from a height, that’s all. You can’t blame Tazeen for that.”

“For now,” he continued in his calm but resolute tone, “don’t get entangled in this matter. You’ve met your sister after so long—don’t spoil the moment with harsh words.”

In the kitchen, Tazeen stood quietly while Maria talked about her life in America, but her mind kept drifting toward the conversation in the lounge. She couldn’t hear their words clearly, yet she could sense their tones—and that was enough. She had thought that, as a divorced woman, she would have to face criticism from the world outside, but she hadn’t known that the first wound would come from those bound to her by blood.

✦✦✦✦

“What a vile man he turned out to be,” said Falak, her voice brimming with anger after hearing the entire story from Nazli.

The three friends sat together in the college courtyard after class, reviewing everything that had happened. The air carried a hush of late afternoon—sunlight fading, notebooks half-closed, hearts still restless.

“So it was just flirting,” said Sarah, folding her arms. “No real love at all.”

“He *did* love me,” Nazli said weakly, “but now he says it wasn’t the kind of love I thought it was. He even talked about marriage—but now he says he only said that to make me feel better.”

“Maybe he’s under pressure from his parents,” Nazli added after a pause, clinging desperately to some thread of logic. “Maybe he’s sacrificing his happiness for them.”

“It’s not that, Nazli,” said Falak sharply. “You’re still holding on to illusions. The truth is clear—please, come out of them.”

“It’s not an illusion,” Nazli said helplessly. “It’s love.”

Falak’s anger softened into pity.

“But he doesn’t love you,” Sarah said gently, though the words stung. “He just amused himself for a while and left. That’s all your love story is.”

“But I do love him,” Nazli whispered, staring into the distance—like someone afflicted with a deep, incurable illness.

“Then keep loving him,” Sarah said quietly. “But he’s told you plainly that he doesn’t love you. Isn’t that enough?”

“He hasn’t gone,” Nazli murmured. “He never really goes. He’s with me all the time, Sarah.”

Tears spilled from her eyes. “Tell me what to do—where to go. Nothing feels right anymore.”

“Nazli, focus on your studies,” Sarah urged. “This couldn’t have happened at a worse time. The exams are near—our final results will decide our admission to medical college. Zain’s gone—forget him. But you need to save yourself now.”

“He flirted—I didn’t. How can he forget me in a day? I can’t forget him,” Nazli said defensively.

“And what else can you do but forget him?” asked Falak bluntly.

Nazli stared silently at the wall for a long moment, then said quietly, “I don’t want to do anything anymore.”

Sarah looked at her in alarm. “What do you mean?”

“I mean this is my last day at college.”

“What will you do then?” Falak asked, her brow furrowing.

“Stay home,” Nazli answered faintly.

“And your studies?” Sarah’s fear deepened.

“No more studies. Nothing—until Zain comes back to me himself.”

Sarah and Falak exchanged a look heavy with worry.

“Have you lost your mind?” Falak said sharply. “You’re destroying yourself for someone who didn’t think of you for even a minute. How childish!”

“You’ll see,” Nazli said, tears glistening in her eyes yet a fragile smile forming on her lips. “One day Zain will realize he made a mistake—he acted too quickly, under his parents’ pressure. If my love is truly pure, he’ll come back to me himself. And that day… that day my life will begin anew.”

Sarah and Falak stared at her, their hearts sinking. They had suspected it before, but now they were certain—Nazli’s mind was no longer steady.

“Nazli, you’re saying all this out of depression,” Sarah said softly. “You need to end this hope. Men like Zain only know how to flirt. You think he left because of family pressure? No—when someone truly wants to stay, they face every obstacle. Those who don’t want to stay need only an excuse.”

Nazli didn’t respond. Her eyes were vacant, unfocused.

“No,” she said at last. “Zain did it in haste. You’ll see—he’ll come back soon.”

“What’s wrong with you?” Falak almost shouted. “Don’t you care about your self-respect, your dignity? He crushed you under his feet and walked away without a word—and you still sit here holding the beads of his name?”

“Yes,” Nazli said simply. “Because I still love him just as I did before.”

“What’s the use?” Sarah asked bitterly.

“Love isn’t done for use or gain,” Nazli said sharply.

“Then keep loving him,” Sarah said coldly. “But stop waiting. He’ll never come back.”

They didn’t know that life’s bitter lessons stay with us until their meaning has been carved deep into our hearts—until the final nail of pain has been driven, until every mask has fallen away, until hope itself turns to despair. Only then does the heart cease swimming in the sea of illusion.

“How can you both be so sure?” Nazli asked after a long silence.

“Because we’re standing outside the circle, seeing everything clearly, with reason,” Sarah replied. “You’re inside the circle, seeing with your heart. That’s the difference.”

Nazli sat for a while, lost in nothingness. Then she rose with them and walked home.

That day was her last in college. She never went back again.

A few days later, the classes ended as the annual exams began, and every student withdrew into the solitude of preparation— while Nazli withdrew into a silence far deeper.

✦✦✦✦

Only two days remained before Imran and his family were to return to America. Their month in Pakistan had slipped by in a blur of visits—relatives from both sides of the family, old friends, and countless acquaintances. Throughout this time, Imran’s behaviour toward Tazeen and Kashan had remained distant. Out of respect for his parents, he maintained civility, yet beneath that restraint simmered a quiet disapproval—disapproval of Tazeen’s decision to end her marriage and return to her parents’ home. Since Tazeen had strictly forbidden them, Athar Mirza and Bilqees had not revealed to Imran or his wife the true reason behind the divorce. Imran, however, grew increasingly irritated by the endless questions from relatives about his sister’s situation. He and Maria had both tired of the polite lies and half-truths they were forced to deliver at every gathering. None of this escaped Athar and Bilqees’s notice. They were deeply disappointed by Imran’s indifference, for they had expected understanding and warmth from their only son—but found instead a coolness they could neither confront nor explain. Two days before his departure, when Maria had gone to her parents’ house with the children, Athar seized the rare moment of solitude. Gathering courage, he finally voiced what had long pressed upon his heart.

“Son, I want you to take a little care of your sister, Tazeen.”

“What do you mean, Papa?” Imran paused midway, his hands frozen over the half-packed trolley bag. Bilqees sat beside him, quietly folding his clothes.

“Son, I know that Tazeen has no intention of marrying again,” Athar continued gently. “She’s made it clear that she wishes to spend the rest of her life with her child.”

“Oh,” Imran replied flatly, resuming his packing.

“We’re old now, my son,” Athar went on patiently. “Who knows when God might call us back? Her child is still young—she herself is young. The divorce has left a deep wound on her heart.”

Imran interrupted coldly. “Papa, that’s something Tazeen should have thought about herself. Every woman makes sacrifices to keep her home together. She should have compromised. Look at Maria—she completely changed herself for me. She’s moulded herself exactly to my wishes. And honestly, Papa, do you think this child will stand by her? When Kashan grows up, he’ll naturally side with his father—because that’s his blood.” Athar and Bilqees listened in silence, their hearts heavy. When Imran paused to breathe, Athar spoke before he could continue.

“Imran, when you don’t know the whole truth, you have no right to talk like this about my daughter. My child is innocent and pure-hearted—only her destiny was cruel. Sometimes, my son, a person is utterly helpless before the trials written in their fate.”

It tore at Athar’s heart to hear such words about his daughter from his only son.

“I was the one who stood by Tazeen during her separation,” he said, his voice trembling with both pain and pride. “I gave her courage when she had none—because it was necessary, for her and for her child.”

Outside the door, Tazeen had just approached carrying a tray of tea. She stopped in her tracks, hearing their voices. No one inside noticed her.

“The child is also Mohsin’s, Papa,” Imran said coldly. “And no matter how much you blame Mohsin, the boy will grow up to be like his father—you’ll see.”

“How can you say that so surely?” Bilqees asked softly.

“Because he’s Mohsin’s son,” Imran replied. “No matter what you do, his father’s traits will stay in his blood.”

“Tazeen will never let him become like Mohsin—of that I’m certain,” said Athar firmly.

“Papa, only time will tell,” Imran said dismissively. “Anyway, what exactly do you want me to do for Tazeen?”

“Son, I want you to arrange for her to come to America. Keep her with you. It will secure both her future and Kashan’s education. We’re old now—what if something

happens to us? Pakistan is not a safe place for a single woman to live alone. I'll bear all her expenses until she's able to stand on her own feet."

Athar spoke with quiet earnestness, his eyes glistening.

Imran thought for a moment, then said, "Papa, I don't think Maria will agree."

"What problem could Maria have?" Athar asked, incredulous.

"Papa, she says that Tazeen and Kashan are emotionally disturbed. She thinks they won't be able to adjust to life with us in America."

"You're judging your sister and her son based on your wife's opinion?" Athar's disappointment deepened, his voice breaking slightly. "I didn't expect this from you, Imran. You should have stood up for your sister."

The pain in Athar's tone was unmistakable. But the one most wounded by those words was Tazeen herself. She turned silently away, her heart burning, and walked back toward the kitchen without entering the room.

That day, something hardened within her—a quiet, unshakable resolve. She would never again let the broken bond of her marriage dictate her life. She would rise on her own strength and raise Kashan to be not merely a good son but a man of worth.

For that, she would need no one's help—certainly not her brother's, nor her sister-in-law's.

When Imran finally returned to America with his family, he left behind no tender memory for Tazeen to hold on to.

✦✦✦✦

A few weeks later, Tazeen began designing clothes at home for Mrs. Zarina Israr, the mother of an old friend who owned a boutique. What had begun as a small favour soon turned into a profession. Within months, Tazeen's designs grew so admired that the boutique's sales soared beyond expectation. Recognizing her gift, Mrs. Zarina offered her a permanent position—with a handsome salary. Tazeen accepted without hesitation. The boutique's garments were now sought not only across Pakistan but also among Pakistani and Indian communities abroad—in the United States and Europe alike.

In just five years, Mrs. Zarina's small business had expanded from a single outlet to ten branches nationwide. During those years, Tazeen made peace with her past and rediscovered the quiet rhythm of life. Her world now revolved around only two

things—her work and Kashan. Because of them, even the loneliness that had once haunted Athar and Bilqees began to fade from their home. As her reputation spread, offers came pouring in from major fashion houses across the city. Yet Tazeen remained loyal to Mrs. Zarina—the woman who had believed in her talent when the rest of the world had turned away. The business flourished day and night. Mrs. Zarina often said the boutique's success was due to Tazeen's blessed presence and tireless devotion. She treated her not merely as an employee but as family. Gradually, the anxiety that had long shadowed Athar and Bilqees transformed into pride. They saw their daughter, once broken, rise again with dignity and perseverance.

Tazeen had fulfilled the promise she once made to herself— to stand tall, independent, and unyielding. Kashan, too, grew into a bright and gifted child—admired by his teachers, loved by his grandparents. He became known both at school and within the family circle for his intelligence and maturity.

Where Tazeen's success brought peace to her parents' hearts, Kashan's achievements filled hers with quiet pride.

Through her own life, Tazeen taught those around her one silent truth— sometimes, to change your life, you must dare to make bitter, painful decisions.

✦✦✦✦

On the cracked, barren earth, small thorny *keekar* trees rose at uneven distances, their shadows scattered under the pale moonlight. A few steps away lay the bleached bones of dead animals—white and ghostly against the dust. Across this desolate expanse, Nazli walked barefoot, her feet streaked with blood. She lifted the edge of her dupatta carefully, avoiding the carcasses that lay strewn along her path. The moonlight glinted upon the bones, lending them a ghastly sheen. The wind howled mercilessly across the plain—dry, sharp, and relentless. Yet she continued moving forward, slow but unwavering.

Suddenly, a sound pierced the silence— a ringtone. It was the one she had once set for Zain's number. Nazli froze. Her breath caught in her throat. A few paces ahead, her phone lay glowing faintly on the ground. Beside it crouched a vulture, its curved beak tearing at the flesh of some dead creature. The ringtone grew louder. Zain's name flashed across the screen, bright against the darkness. From somewhere deep within, Nazli gathered the courage to move. She took a single step forward. The vulture screeched and sprang upward, its vast wings flapping violently above her head.

Nazli screamed— and awoke.

Her eyes flew open, wide and terrified. For a long moment she could not tell where she was. Then recognition returned—it was her own room, the same one where she had drifted into uneasy sleep barely two hours ago, lost in sorrowful thoughts. Such haunting dreams had become routine for her now. Sometimes she found herself wandering through dense forests; sometimes amid the ruins of a shattered city; sometimes drowning in the flooded courtyard of her college, waves rising high enough to swallow her. And each time, just as the waves reached her chest, she woke. Tonight too, her cry brought Roshan Ara rushing into the room.

“What happened?” she asked, breathless with worry.

“Nothing,” Nazli murmured faintly.

“What’s wrong with you? Why do you lock yourself in this room all day?” Roshan Ara’s voice trembled between concern and irritation.

“I’m not feeling well,” Nazli answered softly.

“What happened?”

“My head hurts.”

“Today Sana’s in-laws are coming to finalize the wedding date,” Roshan Ara continued, adjusting the edge of her dupatta. “Just two or three months away now. You’ll have to help me with the preparations after your exams—you and Sana both. There’s no one else I can rely on.”

Nazli understood the hidden reproach but remained silent.

“Are you even listening?” her mother asked again, suspecting she had fallen asleep.

“Yes,” Nazli whispered.

In truth, she felt indifferent to everything around her. Like a fragile doll suspended between waking and dreaming, she opened her eyes and closed them again—but words no longer came easily.

“What’s wrong with you? You don’t even study anymore. You just stay shut up in here all day. Speak up!”

“Nothing’s wrong,” Nazli said, rubbing her eyes and forcing herself upright.

“Have you stopped going to college too? Are you on vacation?”

“I’ll only go when the exams start.”

“When do they begin?”

“Next month.”

“So you won’t even be able to help me now,” Roshan Ara muttered. “Sana will be busy with her job—she doesn’t want to resign until her savings committee finishes. And with your father and brother’s financial condition, this wedding is pure madness. Your father’s already asked your aunt for another loan—and we still haven’t paid the first one!”

Her hands moved restlessly, tidying the room while her words tumbled on. Nazli knew exactly where this conversation would end.

“Why don’t children today ever see their parents’ struggles? They fall in love and forget the world. Since that girl Anita entered this house, our peace has vanished.”

“Ammi, please let me sleep a little,” Nazli said irritably, pulling the sheet over her face.

“Look at the state of this room! Sana at least works, but you—what’s become of you, Nazli? You spend all day in bed!”

Roshan Ara could not bear the sight. Nazli had never been this careless before.

But Roshan Ara lacked a mother’s deeper perception—the ability to see the invisible storms within her child.

She could not recognize that Nazli’s isolation, her disinterest, her refusal to eat or speak—were not signs of laziness but of despair.

Roshan Ara was a simple woman. Married young for her beauty, she had borne five children in quick succession. Life’s burdens had left her no time to learn the world’s subtler ways. Her limited education had planted in her a lifelong insecurity.

“Try to feel better by evening. Sana’s in-laws are coming. Help me clean and prepare,” she said finally, and left the room.

As soon as she was gone, Nazli felt a strange stillness settle over her. Her mind was too weary to hold her mother’s endless words.

“How can I marry you, Nazli, when our family backgrounds are so different?”

Zain’s voice echoed in her mind.

Those words had shattered her heart like glass—yet in her imagination, the palace of love they destroyed still had one door intact. And she sat before that door, unwilling to move away. She had always been quiet by nature, but now silence had consumed her completely. The world around her kept changing, yet she remained still.

Sana's wedding had been fixed—Nazli could not even recall the date. Her exams were near—she had not opened her books. She would sit for hours pretending to study, her eyes unfocused, her thoughts drifting until tears blurred her vision. Even prayer offered no escape. Whenever she stood before God, Zain's face appeared before her eyes. She began to feel that even God no longer wished to hear her prayers—for why else would her thoughts keep returning to him?

Days turned into weeks; weeks into months.

Her exams were now only days away when, one afternoon, Sarah arrived unannounced.

She was shocked. Nazli had grown thin; her cheeks hollow, her veins visible beneath her pale skin. The faint line across her forehead pulsed with each heartbeat.

"Oh my God, Nazli! What have you done to yourself?" Sarah exclaimed, pulling her into a tight embrace.

Since their last meeting at college, Nazli had not answered a single call or message—neither Sarah's nor Falak's. She had even avoided the home phone, pretending illness whenever someone called for her.

"Still drowning in grief over that worthless man?" Sarah asked bluntly.

"He's not worthless. He's just… bound by circumstances," Nazli said defensively.

"Did he say that to you?" Sarah challenged.

"He never said any such thing."

"Some things don't need to be said. I know he'll contact me soon," Nazli replied faintly.

"He never will," Sarah said firmly. "Zain's kind of men end affairs as easily as they start them."

"Let's not talk about it," Nazli cut her off. "Time will prove who's right and who's wrong."

Sarah's patience snapped.

“How long will you live in this fantasy, Nazli? Why can’t you face reality?”

Nazli said nothing. She knew the truth—that Zain had made a mockery of her love. But knowing it did not lessen the pain.

“I still love him,” she whispered dreamily.

“Forget him, and think about your exams. You’ve stopped going to college altogether! Classes before finals are crucial—you know that.”

“I’ve decided to quit studying,” Nazli said calmly.

Sarah stared at her in disbelief.

“Are you insane? You’ll destroy your future over a meaningless affair—over someone who doesn’t even think about you?”

“Sarah, if you want us to stay friends, please don’t argue with me. I know what I’m doing. I can’t focus on studies or life or anything.”

Her eyes filled again.

“You’ll have to force yourself to move on,” Sarah said softly. “You can’t spend your life staring at a closed door. You’re one of the top students. Do you want to throw away your medical career?”

“None of that matters,” Nazli said bitterly. “You once said I crave appreciation because no one values me. Well, even now—I’ve never felt more useless and alone.”

“But heartbreak doesn’t mean you end your life, Nazli,” Sarah pleaded. “We still have to live. Giving up before time is suicide.”

“People don’t only die by suicide, Sarah. Grief kills too.”

“Zain isn’t worth it,” Sarah snapped.

Just then, Roshan Ara entered with a tray of tea, and both girls fell silent.

“Sarah, please talk some sense into this girl. She’s taking her exams so seriously she’s stopped eating altogether!”

Nazli and Sarah exchanged a knowing look. After a few polite remarks, Roshan Ara left the room. Sarah kept trying to reason with her, but Nazli would not listen. At last, Sarah gave up and went home. Nazli took her exams without studying. Her past year’s work carried her through—she did not fail, but she did not care either. She had once dreamed of becoming a doctor, but fate had written another story. She announced

she would not study further. Given the family's financial strain, no one argued. Nazli had lost interest in life itself. Her only wish was that somehow, Zain would return.

✦✦✦✦

During her exams, Nazli avoided both Sarah and Falak, leaving the hall early each day. Their concern only reminded her of Zain. After the finals, she reluctantly joined in the preparations for Sana's wedding, choosing tasks that allowed her to remain unseen and alone. Anita often asked her about Zain, but Nazli never replied. Anita noticed her silence and mentioned it to Amir, who dismissed it lightly, unwilling to interfere. Nazli did not even invite Sarah or Falak to the wedding. Her friendship had died along with her love. Roshan Ara, unaware of the storm raging within her daughter, was pleased to see her participating again. Sana, too, was grateful for her help. But only Nazli's heart knew the truth—that this sudden involvement, this apparent energy, was nothing more than a veil, a fragile disguise to conceal her pain. Her thoughts still revolved entirely around Zain. Every breath, every prayer, every dream carried his name. She believed, with blind and desperate certainty, that one day he would return. But the one who noticed her instead was Ahmer—Sana's husband's cousin. He had seen her once at the wedding, and from that very moment, something within him was captured. He wanted her for himself. He spoke to his parents about her, and they, in turn, approached hers.

"What objection do you have to Ahmer's proposal?" Roshan Ara stood by Nazli's bed, her hands on her hips, her tone sharp with authority.

"Ammi, what's wrong with you? Why are you suddenly in such a hurry to get me married?"

"Why shouldn't I be? You've already decided to quit studying."

"Yes, I have."

"Then? It's a good proposal. The boy works in Dubai, comes from a respectable family. He's Sana's husband's cousin, and they're not asking for dowry—they're ready to settle for a simple nikah. He's an only son, and his family really liked your looks."

"And he's handsome too!" she added as a final enticement.

"Ammi, I don't want to get married," Nazli said—the same line she had repeated countless times.

"Enough of this 'I don't want to marry' nonsense! You don't want to study, you don't want to socialize—what do you want then? To rot in this room forever?"

Her mother's voice rose sharply.

"You children have no regard for your parents' wishes. This is a fine match—people dream of such proposals! Listen carefully: they're coming next week to finalize the engagement, and I'll set the wedding date after your results."

Roshan Ara was genuinely pleased with the family. She had no idea of the tempest inside her daughter.

"Ammi, this is unfair. Don't I have a say in my own life?"

"Who is it, Nazli? Have you fallen for someone too—like your brother? Answer me!"

The name Zain flared painfully in Nazli's heart. For a fleeting moment, she wanted to tell her mother everything—then realized how futile it would be.

"There's no such thing, Ammi. I just don't want to marry," she said faintly.

"For God's sake, Nazli, don't increase our troubles. Even if you wanted to study further, I wouldn't refuse this match. Do you know how many proposals came for you during Sana's wedding? I turned them all down. But this one feels right—and you'll go to Dubai after marriage! What could be better?"

Nazli stared blankly at her reflection in the dressing mirror.

"Ammi, if I'm destined to go to Dubai, I'll go there even without this marriage."

"Stop speaking in riddles! You haven't seen the world. We're not wealthy enough to get such proposals every day. Your father and brother aren't highly educated either—these days people want educated families. God gave you beauty; be grateful for it. Your face makes people overlook everything else."

"Who told you beauty makes people forget everything?" Nazli said quietly, her voice trembling.

"This face has never brought me happiness—only pain."

Her mother stared at her, stunned and uncomprehending.

"What do you mean by that? You've become strange lately—what's wrong with you? Your father keeps asking why you're so lost, why you stay locked in your room. He worries for you so much, but you care for none of us!"

Nazli said nothing.

“Look, Nazli,” Roshan Ara continued, softening her tone, “your father agrees with me. Sana’s checked everything—there’s no flaw in this boy. Don’t add to our problems. Even if you want, we can delay the marriage a year or so.”

Nazli remained silent, and her mother mistook that silence for consent.

The next morning, she sent word to Ahmer’s family that they could come next week to finalize the engagement.

She did not know that Nazli had already decided to end this matter her own way— a way that would quietly undo all her mother’s plans.

✦✦✦✦

“Hello?”

“Yes?”

“Is this Ahmer?”

“Yes, speaking.”

“I’m Nazli—Sana’s sister. Can we meet?”

“Of course. Where and when?”

“You can decide—but only in a public place. And please don’t mention this to anyone. I’m trusting you.”

“You have my word,” he replied simply.

“Please text me the place and time after thinking about it. It should be during the day. Khuda Hafiz.”

✦✦✦✦

Nazli arrived at the shopping mall Ahmer had mentioned well before the appointed time. She chose a seat in a corner of the coffee shop from where she could watch everyone entering or leaving. She had never seen Ahmer before—only heard of him. Having arrived half an hour early, every man walking toward her seemed, for a moment, to be him. As she waited, her right hand unconsciously turned the ring Zain had once given her. The memory of that day returned—when instead of going to college, she had met him for the first time, and he himself had slipped that ring onto her finger. She gazed at it now—its modest shine glimmering between her long, graceful fingers. It seemed to her the most beautiful ring in the world, perhaps because it carried his memory.

“This doesn’t look like a gold ring at all, Nazli,” Sarah had said once, turning it over in her hand.

That moment, and Falak’s mocking laughter, came back vividly.

“Even if it were made of brass, to me it would still be a diamond ring,” Nazli had said, snatching it back and sliding it onto her finger.

“Its colour will fade—it’s just gold-plated,” Falak had warned.

“We’ll talk about that when it happens. I don’t want to hear another word,” Nazli had replied irritably and walked away.

Even now, the ring’s shine remained unchanged. How wrong Sarah and Falak were, she thought. She ran her fingertip lovingly over it—when a voice broke her reverie.

“Nazli!”

She looked up. A handsome young man of about twenty-five or twenty-six stood smiling down at her.

“I’m Ahmer—you probably don’t recognize me.”

“Oh, I’m sorry! I hadn’t seen you before, not even in a picture—so I couldn’t recognize you.” She smiled politely.

“But we did speak briefly at the wedding. No matter.” Ahmer sat down opposite her, placing his car keys and wallet on the table.

“Did you order anything, or shall I?” His manner was courteous, cultured—without pretension.

“No, I haven’t ordered yet,” she said softly.

Ahmer called the waiter, glanced through the menu, and after consulting her, ordered coffee and some light snacks.

Roshan Ara had been right—he was not only good-looking but also an exceptionally decent man. But he’s not Zain, Nazli thought silently.

“So, tell me,” Ahmer smiled gently, leaning forward, “can I trust you?”

“Of course,” he said, surprised. “But what’s this about?”

“You see,” Nazli began hesitantly, “my family is extremely happy about your proposal. They’re determined that this match should happen.”

“That’s wonderful! My family and I feel the same. We have no conditions.”

Ahmer's face lit up. From the moment he had seen her at the wedding, he had made inquiries and, with his parents' approval, sent the proposal. When her family agreed, his joy had been complete.

"But I don't want this marriage to happen."

That one quiet sentence drained the colour from his face.

"I see," Ahmer said softly, watching her.

"Yes."

"Then?"

Nazli was surprised—he hadn't asked why, only then.

"My family won't listen to me. Despite my refusal, they keep trying to convince me by listing your virtues. When I stayed silent, they mistook it for consent—and called your family to fix the engagement."

She explained everything in one breath.

"And now what do you want from me?" Ahmer asked, his tone calm, without offense.

"I want you to decline the proposal yourself—before your family visits ours to finalize it." Nazli finally revealed the purpose of her meeting.

"I know I'm asking a great favour, but believe me—even if you marry me, you'll gain nothing." She looked at him with quiet pleading.

"Why?"

At last, the question came.

"Because I'm living a half-dead life. I breathe, but there's no life left within me. I'd advise you not to become a vulture."

"A vulture?" Ahmer repeated, startled.

"Yes. Because if you seek happiness and comfort from something lifeless, you'll have to see yourself as one. Spare yourself that fate—it'll be better for both of us."

She fell silent.

Ahmer lowered his gaze, thoughtful. "You're a beautiful girl, mashallah—but may I ask what happened that made you stop feeling alive?"

Nazli did not hide anything.

“The man I loved left me. See this ring? He put it on my finger himself. Tell me—how could someone make such a promise and then abandon me? That’s why I’m sure he’ll return one day. My love is too strong for him to stay away.”

Tears glistened in her eyes.

“I know—you must think I’m a bad girl, someone who had an affair. But I swear, I loved him truly. It wasn’t an affair! I’ve never even been friends with any boy before him. But fate made me meet him—he approached me first, and later, because of family pressure, he left. Yet I know he’ll convince them and come back. I can’t explain this to my parents—they’re simple, trusting people. I’ve never taken a wrong step, because my honour and theirs mean everything to me. I just made one mistake—loving someone—and I didn’t know it would end like this, that he’d leave me and I’d die while still alive.”

Tears rolled freely down her cheeks.

“Please don’t cry—here, take a tissue… and some water,” Ahmer said gently, placing them before her.

Nazli wiped her tears, took a sip of water, and waited quietly for his response.

“Don’t worry,” he said at last. “I’ll do as you’ve asked.”

“I’ll never forget your kindness,” she said gratefully.

“But tell me—how long will you keep rejecting every proposal? Will you ask every man the same favour?”

It was a question she had never asked herself. Right now, she saw Ahmer’s proposal only as a calamity to be averted.

“He’ll come back soon—I’m sure of it.”

“Whatever you’ve shared with me today, I promise—I’ll never speak of it to anyone. You have my word.”

He had, unknowingly, made her the promise most precious to her heart.

Nazli never realized that Ahmer’s decision to sacrifice his own wish stemmed from the instant love he had felt for her.

After finishing their coffee, Ahmer paid the bill and rose politely. Five minutes later, Nazli too stood up and walked toward the exit.

As Nazli passed the boutique-lined corridor of the mall, she slowed. Her eyes, drawn instinctively to a café window, froze mid-step. There—seated within, amid a lively group of stylish young men and women—was Zain. Her breath halted. The world around her dimmed to stillness. He sat at ease, laughing, surrounded by girls in sleeveless tops and jeans, their gestures bold, their smiles carefree. The girl beside him—a fair young woman with a high bun and a bright red sleeveless blouse—had her arm looped through his, whispering something into his ear. And on his face was that same tender expression he had once reserved for Nazli alone. The girl suddenly noticed Nazli standing outside the glass wall, staring. She leaned closer to Zain, nudging him discreetly and gesturing toward her.

Zain turned.

For one suspended instant, their eyes met.

Nazli thought—he would rise, come to her, or at least look startled. Some flicker of recognition, of remorse, of memory.

But no.

He looked at her once—calmly, blankly—then turned away, as though she were a stranger who had merely wandered into his line of sight.

“Who’s that girl?” the woman beside him asked, tilting her head.

“No idea,” Zain replied casually, shrugging—and turned his back completely.

Nazli could not hear the words, but she saw the shape of his lips, the motion of his shoulders—

“No idea.” The phrase struck her like a blade.

At that moment, everything became clear. In Zain’s eyes, she was nothing. Nothing at all. The disdain with which he turned away drove the final nail into the coffin of her hope. She had never felt so small—not when Huma had humiliated her before him, not even when he had mocked her love the day they parted. Now, the last veil over her illusions was torn away. Was this the man for whom I destroyed myself? Her mind flashed through everything she had lost—her peace, her studies, her closest friends, and today, even a good man like Ahmer—all sacrificed for the mirage of Zain’s love. Perhaps fate had sent Ahmer for this very reason: so that she could witness the truth with her own eyes. Otherwise, she would never have come to this mall—never have seen this moment—never have been freed. Ahmer had done her two favours in life, and the second, she knew now, she would never forget.

Nazli turned and walked away. There was nothing left to stay for. But tonight, her heart and mind were clearer than they had ever been. She finally knew where she must go—and what she must do. This time, she did not lose her way home. As she stepped into the night, Professor Najeeb's words echoed in her memory:

"For a loyal soul, love becomes his true biography; but for a faithless one, that same love is nothing but a pastime." Now she understood.

When she reached home, she removed the ring from her finger. She could not bring herself to throw it away, yet she could no longer bear to wear it either. She wished only to return it to Zain someday—how or when, she did not know.

✦✦✦✦

Meanwhile, Zain, oblivious to everything, continued laughing with his friends—his girlfriend's hand still entwined with his, his voice bright, his conscience silent. He was, indeed, the greatest actor—winning invisible awards for deceit. As he left the café, he glanced at his phone: dozens of missed calls from Huma. He sighed.

"Another storm," he muttered.

He had no idea that, at that very moment, Huma was standing in her living room, holding the small box Nazli had once given him—

and that, within the last five minutes, the truth he had buried so carefully had laid itself bare before her eyes.

✦✦✦✦✦✦✦✦

Chapter Three — The Ache of Life

When Nazli stepped inside her house, it felt as though—after walking barefoot for endless hours across a burning desert—she had finally reached the shade of a solitary tree. Along this journey, much of her destiny had slipped gradually from her grasp, scattering like grains of sand along the path she had taken. Many things had escaped her hands—some she had cast away herself, and others fate had snatched from her without mercy. Among all those lost fragments, the most precious was trust. She could no longer trust anyone in life, nor could she believe again in the fabled beauty of love. From a very young age she had watched this tender emotion slowly suffocate within her—and today, it had breathed its last. She had buried the dead body of love forever in the quiet graveyard of her heart. She did not even realize that, as love died, it gave birth to something new within her—a constant ache, a silent, unending regret.

As soon as she entered her room, she pulled open the curtains that had been drawn for many days. The sudden flood of sunlight filled the entire space, revealing how much disorder surrounded her. Remnants of Sana's wedding lay everywhere—piles of decorative ribbons and garlands, her own clothes mixed with those of her younger siblings Ameen and Sharmin, heaps of worn-out dresses, empty boxes of new outfits and shoes—and beside them, lying helplessly forgotten, were her college books. Their open pages fluttered in the breeze as though complaining to her. Nazli had not looked at those books for months. Once, they had been her dearest companions—each page promising her a bright and certain future, just as her own life once had. Nothing in the room rested in its proper place. It was time now to begin restoring order—one thing after another. She did not know where to start.

Slowly, as she picked up each scattered object, she began to feel, unconsciously, that she was gathering together the broken pieces of her own being. When one becomes certain of another's betrayal, the shattered self begins, little by little, to mend again. Something similar was beginning to happen to Nazli. She no longer had any doubt of Zain's deceit. When he had turned his back upon seeing her, the fragments of her lost, broken self had started coming together again— only her heart remained rebellious, unwilling to accept what her mind already knew. That was why, when she took the ring off her finger, her heart began to weep uncontrollably.

That ring—how proudly she had shown it to Ahmer earlier that very day, as if it were the sacred proof of an unbreakable bond. This ring too had played a cruel part in her destruction.

Unconsciously, she had come to see all of Zain's promises and vows embodied in that small circle of metal. She had believed that as long as Zain never asked for it

back, all his pledges would remain true. Even now she could not throw it into the trash. Instead, she wrapped it gently, almost reverently—as if shrouding the dead—and placed it carefully into the very box from which Zain had once taken it to give her.

Now that ring-box looked to her like the coffin of her love. It was necessary to carry that coffin to its graveyard. As long as it remained before her eyes, she knew she could never forget the lifeless corpse of her faithless love lying within. When she finally placed the box in the farthest corner of her wardrobe drawer and shut the door, she turned—and found Roshan Ara standing there.

✦✦✦✦

“A call just came from Ahmer’s house,” Roshan Ara said with a weary sigh and sat down on the chair beside the door.

“Really? Then what happened?”

Nazli kept her voice casual. She had to act unaware—though she herself did not know why the news that she had once expected to bring her peace now felt utterly hollow. The thought that she herself had set fire to Ahmer’s proposal brought her no regret, only a strange calm.

“Ahmer’s mother said that Ahmer himself has refused the proposal. I kept asking questions, but she said Ahmer told her he wants to marry abroad.” Roshan Ara’s tone carried clear disappointment.

“I don’t understand why this idea didn’t occur to him earlier, when his mother herself told me that Ahmer wished to marry you.”

Nazli said nothing. She already knew every word of it.

“You’re not surprised?” Roshan Ara asked, her irritation sharpening at her daughter’s calmness.

“Not particularly,” Nazli replied, dusting the covers of her books.

“Of course, you must be pleased—you protested enough against this marriage.” Roshan Ara’s bitterness had a sting, but Nazli was ready for it.

“This isn’t the first or last proposal in the world—and besides, your daughter isn’t exactly past her age yet,” Nazli said seriously, still arranging the mess around her.

“No, her age isn’t gone—but at this pace it will slip away slowly. That’s why people say when doing a good deed, one shouldn’t overthink. Sometimes Allah fulfills a wish

hidden in the heart immediately." Roshan Ara's disappointment turned quietly into sarcasm.

"Ammi, how can you be so sure it was a good deed? Who knows—perhaps Allah saved us from a greater misfortune." Nazli's voice was calm, still and level like the surface of a quiet lake. Whether she was explaining it to her mother or convincing herself—even she could not tell.

"Yes, yes—now I must take comfort in every sorrow thinking there's hidden good in it! You two said the same thing when your brother got married," Roshan Ara muttered under her breath.

"Believe me, Ammi, that's how it is. Every disappointment sent by Allah hides some mercy for us—we just fail to see it," Nazli said softly, eyes lowered as she dusted her books.

Her tone was gentle—so gentle that even her mother could not take offense, though her words carried the sigh of crushed hopes.

Whatever pain Roshan Ara felt over losing Ahmer's proposal, Nazli's anguish over Zain's betrayal ran far deeper.

"What hidden good can there be in this rejection? We lost such a good match, and you call it betterment!" Roshan Ara's voice trembled with wounded pride.

"All secrets—every veil hidden within life's bitterness—Allah unveils in His own time, Ammi. It only takes a little patience," Nazli replied quietly, taking a long breath as she arranged her books neatly on the study table.

"I'd already spread the happy news among our relatives—that your match was about to be finalized. Now how will I face everyone? People will gossip endlessly!" Roshan Ara said, rising in agitation.

"Ammi, the hardest task is to steady one's heart—why worry about the world?" Nazli said gently, watching her mother leave.

"Because I have to live in this world, among these people! Your overeducated talk makes no sense to me!" Roshan Ara snapped, leaving the room in anger.

Nazli did not see herself as the cause of her mother's sorrow. She knew that what she had done was far less cruel than the injustice she would have committed by marrying Ahmer without love. The strange truth was— even if Ahmer's proposal had come again today, she would still have refused. Before, she had rejected it because she had been waiting for Zain's return. Now, she would refuse because she no longer trusted

life—or people. Her soul had been so wounded that her very understanding of life had changed. After performing her Maghrib prayer, a fever gripped her—rising slowly, tightening its hold through the night. It was the fever of grief.

After a full day of burning, Roshan Ara took her to a nearby clinic, but the fever clung stubbornly, like her sense of worthlessness. For further examination, her father Javaid took her to a large hospital. There, in the waiting area, as Sara hurried past, her eyes fell upon Nazli—and she froze in disbelief.

Without thinking, she rushed toward her.

✦✦✦✦

“Zain, wherever you are right now—come home immediately.”

Zain placed the phone to his ear and heard Huma’s voice deliver this command before the line abruptly cut.

He stood puzzled, uneasy. Such a tone from Huma had always been the prelude to calamity.

When he entered the house, he was stunned—for in the TV lounge, besides Huma and Afzal, Arsalan was seated as well.

Zain’s instinct told him instantly that something dreadful had occurred. All eyes turned toward him. As he stepped closer, Huma rose and struck him sharply across the face.

“Do you feel no shame lying to us?”

Zain stood frozen, one hand to his cheek. He could not comprehend what storm had just broken over him.

“You thought you could make fools of us, Zain?”

It was Afzal’s voice now—harsh, booming. A tremor ran through Zain’s entire body.

“What do you mean?” he asked quietly, narrowing his eyes.

“Shut up, Zain!” Afzal’s voice thundered.

“It means that all your corruption and lies have been exposed,” Huma hissed through clenched teeth.

“This—” she lifted a small box and thrust it before him—“is the gift Nazli gave you. The one you forgot that day in the apartment.” She waved it before his eyes.

“And at least now, I will never again believe the false stories you told me. Shame on you, Zain! Afzal and I trusted you—you repaid that trust with deceit. I’m ashamed of Arsalan too—for helping you hide your lies!” She turned toward Arsalan, her fury spilling over.

“Aunty, I always tried to make Zain understand, but he never listened to me,” Arsalan said softly, his gaze lowered.

“Tell me one thing, Arsalan—who is this girl? You may have lied until now, but today I want only the truth. Tell me—who is Nazli?”

“Speak, Zain! How do you know this girl?” Afzal demanded. “Speak!” Huma’s voice rose again.

“Aunty, Zain met Nazli at the hospital when we went there after Rafat Auntie’s accident. He proposed to her himself, and after carrying on an affair for some time, he left her. The day you met Nazli, Aunty, after that he never contacted her again. That’s the truth—you can believe me.”

Arsalan’s words came clear, though his voice trembled. Once he had aided Zain’s deceit; now even truth felt like betrayal.

“Arsalan, you’re not lying to us now, are you?” Afzal asked wearily.

“I want to hear all this from Zain’s own mouth,” Huma said sharply.

Zain stood silent, watching the scene unfold.

“I have nothing to say,” he answered at last.

“What do you mean? Your parents are asking you questions, and that’s your reply?” Afzal roared.

“Yes. I have nothing to say,” Zain repeated, his tone flat but his eyes blazing red.

“We are your parents, Zain! What shortage of money drove you to commit bank fraud? What were you trying to cover up?” Afzal’s rage echoed through the room.

In her fury, Huma revealed the secret withdrawals from Zain’s account.

“I told you, I have nothing to say,” Zain murmured coldly.

“You see now?” Afzal turned to his wife, his voice trembling with fury. “You always excused him—look what he’s become! God knows what disgrace he’ll bring us next. This is all because of you, Huma!”

“If you’re all finished, may I go now?” Zain asked calmly.

“Get out of here—not just from this room, but from this house! You’ve disgraced us both,” Huma cried out.

Zain glanced once at her, once at Afzal, once at Arsalan—then strode toward his room and slammed the door shut.

“Arsalan, tell me, what else has he been doing? Please—everything.”

“Aunty, I’ve told you all I know. Beyond that, I’m unaware.”

“Who are these other friends?” Afzal demanded.

“I’ve met them once or twice—but I’m not close to them,” Arsalan replied nervously.

“This girl—Nazli—tell me about her,” Huma said as if interrogating the witness of a crime.

“Nazli is a very decent girl,” Arsalan said earnestly. “Zain approached her himself. She believed him, truly. When he abandoned her, she was broken. I arranged their last meeting—he insulted her cruelly, and she left in tears. I don’t think they ever met again.”

Huma pressed a trembling hand to her forehead. “Is this boy insane? What has he become?”

“This all happened because of you, Huma,” Afzal muttered bitterly.

“Aunty,” Arsalan said quietly, “every lie Zain tells is only to keep his image clean in your eyes. He can’t bear restraint.”

“There’s no doubt,” Huma whispered, half to herself. “But what brought him to this?”

“Tell me honestly, Arsalan—does he take drugs?”

“I only know he smokes,” Arsalan admitted.

Huma and Afzal sat down, dazed and wordless. Arsalan left them deep in despair.

The next morning, a phone rang in his home. Still half-asleep, he answered.

“Hello?” “Arsalan! Do you know where Zain is? He’s been missing since last night!”

It was Huma—her voice panicked.

Zain had left the house—and for many days afterward, they did not know that he had not only left the house, but also the city.

✦✦✦✦

Sara approached Nazli without blinking. After greeting her father formally, she embraced Nazli tightly.

What a strange reversal of fate—Nazli had always been the first to cry, but today, seeing her condition, tears filled Sara's eyes instead.

"What has happened to you, Nazli?" she said, her voice trembling as she struggled to steady herself.

"Don't worry—I'm not dying yet." Nazli's voice was faint, worn thin by fever and weakness.

"How could you die? Have you looked at yourself? Your eyes have sunk in—you look like a skeleton. What you were once, and what you've become!" Sara's tone quivered with pity and pain.

"Uncle, which doctor have you brought her to? My cousin works here—she's a good general physician. If you allow, I'll take her to her," Sara suggested.

"As you think best. I have no objection," Javaid replied quietly.

"Then that's settled. Don't worry, I'll get her checked right away." Sara hurried off and soon returned to escort Nazli to the doctor.

After a thorough examination, the doctor concluded that the fever was caused by extreme weakness and depression. She prescribed medicines and advised a few tests.

While Javaid waited in the long queue at the hospital pharmacy, Sara and Nazli sat together on a wooden bench.

"I forgot to ask—you never told me why you came here," Nazli said softly.

"Consider that I came only to see you," Sara smiled gently.

"Yes, that's true," Nazli murmured absently.

"What happened to you, Nazli? How did you become like this in just a few months?" Sara asked tenderly.

"You know, Sara—one day in a crowd like this, I saw Zain," Nazli said, her eyes wandering over the endless flow of people before them.

"Really? And then?" Sara leaned forward, listening closely.

“Then I realized he was only a part of that crowd—and nothing more. As strange to him as I was to everyone else. He saw me, and then turned his face away—turned his back. Between us there was only a pane of glass, yet in that single moment, he made that glass a wall of stone—perhaps like his heart.” Nazli smiled bitterly.

“Ah, I told you long ago, Nazli—there was nothing in it,” Sara sighed deeply. “But maybe it’s good you saw it with your own eyes. It’ll help you forget him sooner.”

“You know, Sara, when Allah becomes very angry with someone, He punishes them through the very person their soul is tied to. Today I think, when Zain turned his back to me, it was a sign—that even Allah had turned away from me.” Nazli’s feverish voice trembled as she poured out her heart.

“Why would Allah be angry with you?” Sara asked, startled.

“Because whatever it was—it was a sin for me. What right did I have to form a connection with a man who was not my husband in religion or law?”

“Islam allows marriage by choice,” Sara replied reasonably.

“By running an affair?” Nazli smiled faintly, the irony cutting through her exhaustion.

“Now that he’s left you, you’ve started thinking of religion?” Sara turned away. “If he had married you, you wouldn’t feel guilty at all.”

“That’s exactly the mistake, Sara. We forget religion and God—and fall into these snares. We begin giving someone else more importance than Allah. To love anyone more than the Creator is the greatest sin, because He is the Creator, yet we start worshipping His creation. Perhaps we see His reflection in people and lose ourselves—but Allah always reminds His servant one day that creation can never be the Creator. Creation leaves you even after your worship, but the Creator never abandons His servant.”

She paused, her breath heavy, her eyes dim with tears.

“I’m not saying I was very religious—but I’ve learned this lesson through Zain’s betrayal. That’s why, Sara, my advice to you is—never place any human beside God, and never walk a path that angers Him.”

A single tear slid from Nazli’s right eye, tracing the curve of her cheek before falling.

Some of her words struck Sara’s heart; others were too difficult for her to accept. Yet she could not deny what every broken soul learns in silence— sometimes, an empty stomach and a wounded heart teach the best lessons of life.

✦✦✦✦

At that moment, Tazeen stood on the brink of witnessing, with her own eyes, the fruit of seventeen years of struggle.

Seventeen years ago, she had returned to her parents' home with her six-year-old son. Her decision to break her marriage with Mohsin had condemned her to the quiet widowhood of separation—and Kashan had grown up in his maternal home like an orphan with living parents.

In childhood, Kashan had unknowingly found in Athar Mirza, Tazeen's father, a love even deeper than that of a real father.

The first seven years of her marriage had been unbearably difficult—but the years after divorce were even harder. She had willingly thrown herself into the fire of separation, yet from those ashes, she forged a purpose—and built her life around it.

Through all her trials, she learned to seek refuge only in Allah.

After ten years of devoted work at Mrs. Zarina Israr's boutique, with her experience and Mrs. Zarina's constant encouragement and financial help, Tazeen finally opened her own small boutique. Through discipline, skill, and sheer perseverance, she transformed it within a few years into one of the city's most admired fashion houses.

She had named it Kashan—and could not have chosen a name more fitting.

For her son's upbringing and education, she had spared no effort. By nature, he had been shy and uncertain as a child, but as he grew older, confidence replaced confusion. Brilliant and diligent, his academic record was spotless.

Yet some shadows of childhood always lingered. He could never quite erase the ache of absence—a father's love, forever distant, forever unknown.

"You're standing here, and I've been searching everywhere for you!"

Kashan's cheerful voice pulled Tazeen out of her thoughts.

"And I was looking for you—wondering where you vanished, leaving me alone here," Tazeen smiled warmly.

"The one I went to find probably won't come. I even requested him earnestly to attend today," Kashan said, glancing through the crowd.

"You must be speaking of your favourite teacher. His presence would have meant a great deal to you today," Tazeen said gently.

“I was allowed to invite three people to the convocation. Besides you, I wanted Nana to come—but he didn’t. And the third person—you already know who it was.”

“Nana couldn’t come, dear; he wouldn’t have been able to sit for so long,” Tazeen replied softly.

Her mother, Bilqees, had passed away a few years after the divorce. All her remaining years had been spent in worry for Tazeen, but after seeing her daughter stand tall again, she had met her own end peacefully.

After Bilqees’s death, loneliness had crept into Athar Mirza’s days. Though Tazeen and Kashan showered him with care, his frail, aging body had long crossed eighty.

“I think at least an hour remains before the convocation begins. Nothing will start until the chief guest arrives—after all, he’s the guest of honour,” Kashan said, adjusting his graduation cap with boyish precision.

“I’ve never seen so many doctors gathered in one place before, Kashan,” Tazeen said with a smile, watching the crowd of young men and women—faces glowing with accomplishment after five years of relentless study.

“And to me, it looks like a parade of a special species—of which I’m a proud part too,” Kashan laughed. “We’ve all studied the same books, faced the same sleepless nights, survived the same ordeals. Only a medical student can understand this life, Mama.”

“But your struggle isn’t over yet,” Tazeen reminded gently. “You’ve earned an MBBS—but you must go abroad for specialization.”

“But Mama, how can I go leaving you behind? You’ll have to come with me,” Kashan said, placing his hands on her shoulders affectionately.

“If you can’t leave your Mama, I can’t leave my Papa,” she teased.

“Then why don’t all three of us go—you, me, and Nana? How much fun that would be!” Kashan said brightly.

“Yes—and let’s take Fazal Din, his wife, and our house along too. Then it’ll be perfect, won’t it?”
Tazeen laughed, and their laughter mingled, warm and full.

A little while later, the convocation began. After the formal speeches, degrees were distributed among the successful graduates. Parents waited eagerly to hear the name that mattered most to them.

Tazeen's heart longed for one announcement only— "Kashan Mohsin."

At last, it came.

It was the happiest moment of her life.

She watched her son climb the stage steps, tears glistening in her eyes. He looked briefly toward the audience, searching for her, but in the sea of faces, he couldn't spot her immediately.

Seventeen years earlier, she had seen that same expression on his face when, as a little boy, he climbed the slide at a park. Seeing her crying below, he had frozen midway, fallen, and hurt himself.

Now, as she watched him ascend the stage again, that memory returned—only this time, her tears were not of grief, but of pride.

If anyone had asked her then what true happiness meant for a mother, no one could have answered better than Tazeen Mirza.

✦✦✦✦

As soon as Nazli turned her head to end her prayer, she found Sarah standing before her. Since their meeting at the hospital, Sarah and Falak had been calling her regularly, inquiring after her health, offering sympathy and company. They had proven to be her truest friends—yet Nazli no longer felt any inclination toward people, nor any interest in life itself. She found comfort only in silence, in solitude. Whenever Sarah or Falak phoned, saying they wished to visit, Nazli always found excuses to decline. But that morning, Sarah had come without informing her.

As Nazli turned from her prayer, Sarah took a folded newspaper from her handbag and exclaimed with delight,

"Nazli! Do you know? I've got the second position in the whole college! I didn't have your roll number, otherwise I'd have checked yours first. I'm sure you must have taken first position, right?" She unfolded the newspaper eagerly before Nazli.

"First, sit down calmly," Nazli said with gentle composure, "and rid yourself of that illusion too. Forget about first position—even passing this time would be nothing short of a miracle." As she folded the prayer mat, Nazli spoke with such tranquil simplicity that it felt almost unreal. Her face was calm; her tone, serenely detached. She handed Sarah her admit card and sat down carelessly beside her.

“I see you’re not even a bit interested in knowing your result,” Sarah said, half teasing, half concerned.

“Seems so, doesn’t it?” Nazli replied quietly.

“You’re just punishing yourself—taking revenge for a broken heart,” Sarah said with a faint smile, masking her worry.

“For now, at least check whether I’ve passed or failed,” Nazli forced a small, tired smile.

Sarah rolled her eyes at her friend’s indifference, then began flipping through the pages of the newspaper, scanning for Nazli’s roll number.

“You know,” Nazli said thoughtfully, “I threw away so many of my things after my breakup—like a fool. I made that heartbreak into a monument for a lifetime.” Her lips curved faintly, her eyes drifting far away.

“There are some failures in life so heavy,” she continued, “that even a hundred triumphs afterward mean nothing. That one failure alone outweighs them all.”

She turned her gaze toward the window. On the narrow ledge outside, a small sparrow hopped restlessly in the summer heat, its beak open, searching desperately for water. Not a single drop was in sight. The bird looked helpless. Nazli did not know why, but in its thirst and agitation, she saw her own reflection. After leafing through the pages at least five times, Sarah sighed in defeat.

“I can’t find your roll number anywhere in this list.”

Nazli laughed softly—a bitter, hollow sound. “You’ll never find my name in the lists of worldly achievements, Sarah.”

It was not true laughter; pain was buried deep in its echo.

“Honestly, Nazli, you need to see a psychiatrist,” Sarah said earnestly. “Sometimes you talk of faith, sometimes of despair, sometimes of hope, then of ruin. When I listen to you, I can’t help but feel sad. The girl I once knew seems to have vanished.”

Nazli smiled faintly. “I feel, Sarah, as though someone threw me down from the height of the sky to the ground—and now my worth is no more than that of a dead lizard. My self-respect is gone, completely.”

Her eyes drifted again to the sparrow, which had just taken flight, only to land again on the same ledge, fluttering helplessly.

“You should think about your future now,” Sarah urged. “Getting into medical college and becoming a doctor wasn’t just your dream—it was ours too.”

“I shouldn’t have dreamed at all,” Nazli said softly. “That was my biggest mistake.”

“There’s nothing wrong with dreaming,” Sarah replied, “but when you realize you’ve woken and the truth isn’t the same as the dream, you shouldn’t destroy your life mourning over it. You must move on—face reality—and keep walking. I don’t know how many subjects you’ve failed, but whatever the result, fix it, Nazli. For God’s sake, come out of this hollow graveyard of false love.”

“Sarah,” Nazli said gently, “long before you came, I’d already looked through that newspaper myself. I already knew my name wasn’t there. I’ve regretted it more than you could ever imagine.”

“Then what will you do now?” Sarah asked softly.

“For now,” Nazli replied with quiet composure, “I’ll see how many subjects I failed, study for those again, and then decide what comes next. But one thing’s sure—even in the ones I passed, I must’ve just scraped through. So, there’s no hope of getting into medical college.”

“And then?” Sarah asked, surprised.

“Then… I’ll start studying something else. Haven’t thought much yet—we’ll see.”

She tried to smile.

“Well, at least you’re not talking about giving up studies altogether anymore,” Sarah said with relief.

“Yes,” Nazli nodded, “but believe me—there’s no hope left now. Once I couldn’t get what I asked life for with all my heart… I’ve stopped wanting anything else.”

“Nazli, we’re too young to lose hope in life. It’s beyond me how a teenage love affair could become such torment,” Sarah said gently.

“It’s not about age, Sarah,” Nazli replied quietly. “Sometimes bitter experiences—whenever they come—change our entire being. They reshape how we think, how we see the world. Maybe there’s some divine wisdom hidden in that pain.”

She leaned her head back against the sofa and gazed at the ceiling.

“Anyway,” Sarah said after a pause, “get your result confirmed and tell me later. And yes—Falak’s been calling too, but your phone’s always off. She couldn’t even reach

you on the landline. She's in Dubai these days, but she'll probably come to meet you when she's back…"

Before she could finish, Nazli interrupted softly, "I'd like to apologize to her—and to you too—for cutting off contact for so long. My mental state wasn't right. I thought it best to stay away from everyone. If I ever said or did anything wrong, please forgive me."

"Forgiven," Sarah smiled. Nazli smiled faintly in return.

A few days later, Nazli learned that she had failed in only one subject. She had passed the rest, though just as she had guessed—barely, with marks too low for medical admission. Nazli, once among the brightest and most admired students of her college—whose teachers had prophesied her success as a doctor—whose name always shone at the top of every merit list—was now struggling, like an ordinary student, merely to pass her intermediate exams.

Those were the darkest and most desolate days of her life.

✦✦✦

"I don't understand," Huma cried, "if the police have failed to find Zain, why don't you use your connections—ask the Governor of Sindh for help?"

After weeping before Afzal for a long while, she finally broke down in desperation. Her own sister and Afzal's siblings had come to console her. The entire family now knew that Zain was missing—and that he had left home in anger.

"What do you expect me to say to him?" Afzal replied, his voice heavy with exhaustion. "That my son ran away from home—please, leave all your important work and go find him?"

"But it's been twelve days, Afzal!" Huma sobbed. "How can you take this so lightly? For God's sake, do something—what if he's in danger?"

"Don't think such dreadful thoughts," Afzal's sister, Riffat, said gently, trying to calm her. "Allah will make things right."

"I've already had Zain's photo and details printed in all the newspapers," Afzal said, his tone drained of energy. "The news has been broadcast on television too. Every day, my men visit hospitals to check unidentified accident victims. I've contacted the police and every intelligence agency I can reach—but there's still no trace of him.

“All of Zain’s friends—the ones I knew—have had their homes searched. Even the passenger lists of every flight in the last twelve days have been checked, and there’s been no match to his ID. Whether he’s hiding somewhere in the city or travelled by road to another—finding him isn’t easy.”

He paused, the strain evident in his voice.

“This is all my fault,” Huma whispered between sobs. “I said such harsh words to him… none of his mistakes were grave enough to deserve what I said. Oh, God!”

Her voice trembled. “How can he stay angry with us for so long? O Allah, please protect my Zain.”

“You can search for the dead,” Afzal said quietly, his eyes glistening, “but when a living person chooses to disappear… finding him is far more difficult.”

Indeed, Zain had inflicted unbearable torment upon both his parents.

✦✦✦

Kashan walked briskly across the courtyard of the college toward the staff room. Five years earlier, he had graduated from this very institution with distinction in pre-medical studies—a success that had easily secured him admission to medical school. In all those years, Kashan had never broken his bond with this place. He felt a deep attachment to its walls and corridors—where he had formed some of the finest friendships of his life—one of them with Professor Najeeb. Kashan admired the professor sincerely, and Najeeb knew nearly everything about his personal life. Kashan had never hidden anything from him; he spoke openly, always listening carefully to his mentor’s words, learning from his wisdom and experience.

“Congratulations, Kashan—many, many congratulations,” Professor Najeeb said warmly, his face lighting up with pride.

“Sir, you were terribly unfair not to come to the convocation. I was sure you’d make time for me.”

Kashan placed a box of sweets on the desk before him. The professor was sitting in the staff room; aside from Kashan, no one else was there.

“I would have come,” the professor smiled, “but I thought your mother must be there. I wanted you to celebrate this joy with her alone.”

“But sir, if you had come, I would’ve been even happier,” Kashan said. “There should’ve been at least one picture of me in my graduation cap—with you.”

“If it’s only a picture you want,” the professor laughed, “bring that cap here, and we’ll take one now.”

“For now, I’ve brought sweets for you instead,” Kashan said, sliding the box toward him.

“So that’s it—you’ll feed me a few sweets and think your duty’s done? I thought you’d throw a grand dinner for your close friends.”

“Oh, that’s still happening,” Kashan smiled. “Consider this sweet a starter for that dinner.”

The professor chuckled and opened the box.

“Assalamu Alaikum, sir.”

The familiar feminine voice came from the doorway. The professor raised his eyes and smiled in recognition.

“May I come in, sir?”

“Oh, Nazli! Wa Alaikum Assalam. Of course, come in.”

He stood up at once. Nazli stepped hesitantly inside.

Kashan, seated directly opposite the professor, could not ignore her entrance. He had seen many beautiful girls before—but there was something indescribably magnetic about Nazli’s face. Or perhaps it was that he felt that magnetism too intensely. He stared, transfixed, unable to look away. Seeing the professor rise, he too stood from his chair.

“It seems,” the professor said cheerfully, “that I’m about to receive another piece of good news today.”

“What good news, sir?” Nazli asked with a polite smile.

“This is Kashan Mohsin,” the professor said. “One of our old students. Today he brought me sweets after receiving his medical degree. And Kashan, this is Nazli Shafi. Her intermediate final results came out this year as well—surely she’s brought some good news about her fine achievement.”

The professor introduced them.

“Sir, you’ve misunderstood,” Nazli said with a small, restrained smile. “I haven’t brought any good news, and there’s nothing remarkable about my result.”

“I only came to thank you. That day you helped me reach home—and I’m truly grateful.”

“Oh, that needed no thanks at all,” the professor said kindly, waving it off. “But at least tell me how your results were. Kashan, she was among our brightest students—topped the board in first year! So, Nazli, which medical college will you be joining?”

Nazli didn’t know how to stop him from praising her when none of it was true anymore. Lying wasn’t in her nature. So she decided to tell the simple truth.

“Sir, I failed one subject in my final year. The rest weren’t very good either. My marks aren’t enough for admission on merit, and I can’t afford a seat on self-finance.”

The professor fell silent for a few moments, then smiled gently and held out the sweet box.

“Well, never mind, Nazli—have a sweet anyway.”

“No, thank you, sir. I’ll be going now. I only came to inquire about the supplementary exams. Passing by, I thought I should thank you personally. What you said to me that day, while getting out of the car—it became a lifelong lesson for me.”

She smiled politely and left.

Even after she was gone, Kashan couldn’t shake off the quiet spell she had left behind. The professor, too, fell silent. The lively energy he’d shown earlier faded.

“You know,” he said after a pause, “I didn’t show it before her, but I felt truly sorry hearing about her result.”

“So did I, sir,” Kashan replied. “It was strange—you introduced her as a topper, and she stood there saying she’d failed.”

“I had expected excellence from her,” the professor murmured thoughtfully.

“What do you mean?” Kashan asked, puzzled.

“Well,” the professor began slowly, “a few days before the exams—on a day of heavy rain—I met her by chance. She couldn’t find a taxi or rickshaw to get home, so I offered her a lift…”

He paused to light a cigarette.

“Then what happened?” Kashan asked eagerly.

“Kashan,” the professor began, his gaze distant, “about fifteen or sixteen years ago, after finishing my matriculation in Bagh, District Kashmir, I came to Islamabad for my intermediate studies.

“There, I fell deeply in love—with a girl from a very modern, Western-minded family. I must have been seventeen. She studied in the same college.

“Having grown up in a small mountain town, I lacked the boldness and confidence of city youth. She noticed my excessive attention immediately. But since I wasn’t bad-looking, she couldn’t ignore me for long.

“It was she who gave me the courage to express my feelings. I stayed in the boys’ hostel attached to the college, and she often came there openly—under the pretext of exchanging books or notes.

“I was one of the bright students—but in a few months, I turned into a mad lover. Everyone thought she came to me only for study help. The other boys envied me.”

Kashan listened intently, though each time the professor mentioned her beauty, Nazli’s face rose unbidden in his mind.

“I was nearly insane in her love,” the professor went on. “If she had asked me to die for her, I would have done it gladly. I couldn’t bear seeing her laugh with another boy. My inferiority complex always frightened me—what if she found my simplicity dull?

“No matter how hard I tried, I could never match the polish of her world. Yet she promised to marry me, even if she had to run away from home.

“I bought her gifts far beyond my means, and in return I wanted nothing but her smile.”

He exhaled smoke slowly.

“It was the time when love letters were the only bridge between hearts. There were no mobiles, no instant messages—only that one hostel telephone, where I could never say much. So we wrote letters—pages of affection and foolish hope.”

He stopped, finished his cigarette—and to Kashan’s surprise, lit another immediately. His eyes carried a sorrow Kashan had never seen before.

“One day,” he said quietly, “she came to return some books—and as usual, she slipped a letter to me before leaving. I kissed it lovingly, opened it—and discovered it wasn’t meant for me at all.

“She had made a mistake in her confusion, given me a letter written to someone else. I read it a hundred times, but I couldn’t turn the name inside into mine. No matter how I rearranged the letters—it wasn’t my name.”

His voice fell to a whisper.

“I could forgive the gravest sin—but not deceit. Not betrayal.

“Now, when I think of it, I realize what I once called inferiority was perhaps a divine warning. When someone truly loves you—and you them—you feel a strange, unseen protection around that bond.”

Here the professor fell silent. His cigarette had gone out. Kashan’s curiosity remained alive.

“Sir,” he asked softly, “what are you trying to say about Nazli?”

“As far as I can tell,” Professor Najeeb said slowly, “that girl, too, has lost her trust somewhere—perhaps in someone she gave her heart to. That day, seeing her wandering aimlessly in the rain, I recognized the same desolation I had once felt. I knew she wouldn’t do well in her exams afterward.”

He sighed. “Some ties lie so close to the heart that when they break, we shatter so completely we can never gather ourselves again.”

“But not every broken bond destroys us, sir,” Kashan said quietly. “Some break-ups become turning points—leading us toward better, brighter paths.”

For a moment, his mother, Tazeen, came to his mind.

The professor smiled faintly.

“You’re right, Kashan. But this truth doesn’t come easily. One learns it only when one accepts every painful event in life as destiny—written by Allah Himself. For He alone is the perfect writer of fate.”

They exchanged a quiet, knowing smile. After taking leave, Kashan walked out of the staff room.

For months afterward, he could not erase the memory of that meeting—or the secret story of Nazli he had heard through the professor. He longed deeply to meet her again, to know her better.

But he did not yet know that sometimes the wishes buried silently in our hearts are fulfilled at the most unexpected turns of life.

✦✦✦

Around eight in the morning, the mobile phone on Afzal's bedside table began to ring. He had only just fallen asleep after taking his prescribed sleeping pills. Since Zain's disappearance, both he and Huma had been dependent on them. Many sleepless nights had left them hollow and restless, and the doctor had insisted on medication. The phone kept ringing for half an hour, yet Afzal did not stir. Then, after ten minutes of silence, it started again—its sharp, persistent tone cutting through the quiet of the room.

Huma, startled awake, shook Afzal's shoulder until he opened his eyes.

He blinked, glanced at the screen—it was his personal secretary. The man had never dared to call at such an early hour.

Sensing that something grave had happened, Afzal answered immediately.

"Sir," came the nervous voice on the other end, "I'm sorry to disturb you, but it's not good news."

Afzal sat upright at once. "What happened?"

Huma, alarmed by his tone, turned toward him, trying to catch every word.

"Sir," the secretary stammered, "we've just received word from the Pakistani Embassy in Thailand—Zain has been arrested at Bangkok Airport for carrying drugs."

For a moment, Afzal froze. "What?" he said, his voice barely audible. "What are you saying? Repeat that!"

Now Huma was fully awake, her pulse quickening.

"Sir, the embassy confirmed it," the secretary repeated carefully. "Zain Sahib has been arrested at Bangkok Airport for carrying narcotics."

Afzal's face turned pale. He pressed a trembling hand to his forehead.

"Oh my God..." he whispered.

"What happened? Tell me!" Huma cried, clutching his arm. "What's happened to Zain?"

"Zain's been arrested—in Bangkok," Afzal said hoarsely.

“What? Why? When? How?” Huma’s voice rose in panic.

“For carrying drugs,” Afzal murmured, as though even uttering the words burned his tongue.

“That’s impossible!” Huma screamed. “Who told you this? They must be mistaken!”

She broke down, sobbing uncontrollably, collapsing onto the bed as her body shook.

Afzal sat rigid, his breath uneven. He forced himself to redial the secretary for more details.

But there wasn’t much to tell.

According to the information, the Bangkok police, during initial questioning, had taken Zain’s family contact numbers and passed them to the Pakistani Embassy. Zain had given his father’s number, the office line, and the secretary’s.

“Come home immediately,” Afzal ordered sharply. “We’ll apply for visas right away. I have to reach Bangkok myself.”

“Yes, sir—on my way,” the secretary replied.

Huma was still crying, whispering broken prayers under her breath.

Afzal’s hands trembled as he tried to steady himself. He began making calls—reaching out to every contact, every friend, every string of influence he could pull.

Within an hour, Huma’s sister and her husband had arrived; Afzal’s brother came soon after. They decided to keep the news private, sharing it only with the closest family members.

No one had imagined that the son missing for fifteen days would be found in such circumstances.

Even Afzal’s most powerful connections could do little. Zain was in a foreign land—under a system where the law was ironclad and merciless.

Zain had been preparing for his trip to Bangkok for several weeks. He had already mentioned it to Huma on the same day she had told him about Afzal’s cousin Raheela returning from Canada. He and his friends had planned everything together. As always, Zain had managed his expenses himself—by secretly withdrawing money from Huma’s various bank accounts using forged signatures, along with whatever remained from his own allowance. His friends had done much the same. After leaving home, Zain spent his first two nights in a five-star hotel in the city. The booking had

been made by one of his girlfriends, Anila, who had used her own national ID card for it. According to their plan, he then departed for Bangkok with two of his friends—Salar and Adeel. Neither of these two was known to Zain's family, nor did anyone know their home addresses. Salar was badly addicted to heroin and cocaine. Zain himself occasionally took a few intoxicating pills, but he had never fallen into heavy drugs like heroin or cocaine. None of them had any intention of smuggling drugs. However, Salar, unable to endure separation from his addiction, secretly decided to take a small amount of cocaine for personal use. He carefully unstitched the inner seams of his belt, slipped the fine white powder inside, and had the seams resewn tightly by a cobbler. Salar knew very well what the punishment for drug smuggling could be—yet he also knew that from Karachi to Bangkok and back, finding a new supplier would take time, and waiting that long without heroin was nearly impossible for him. In Pakistan, he had never faced withdrawal; the drug had always been easily available. Now, for this trip, he had hidden a small amount for himself and said nothing to Zain or Adeel, fearing they would object or cancel his place altogether. He also wanted them to act naturally, without the nervousness that might arouse suspicion during security checks. During international flights, passengers are routinely asked to remove belts and metal objects for scanning. At Karachi Airport, Salar followed the same procedure—he placed his belt, wallet, silver chain, wristwatch, and phone into a plastic tray as instructed. The tray passed through the X-ray tunnel and emerged on the other side. After inspection, the security officer returned his belongings without question. Salar felt no fear. The quantity he carried was so small that even if discovered, it would not have constituted a major case—and he had enough money to silence any corrupt official. If, by chance, he encountered an honest one, he believed his influential father's name would be enough to set him free. He calculated there was only a five percent chance of being caught in Bangkok; after all, the belt contained barely a trace. Still, he knew security there was far stricter than in Pakistan. When the screening at Karachi Airport was complete, Salar entered the waiting lounge, unbuckled his belt, and handed it casually to Zain. He put on Zain's belt instead, saying it suited his jeans better. Zain thought nothing of it. Among his friends, they often exchanged belts, jackets, or T-shirts for fun. He suspected nothing. Once they boarded the plane, Salar's confidence soared. Whatever flicker of fear remained vanished entirely. Neither Zain nor Adeel had the faintest idea of his deception. After nearly five hours in the air, the plane landed at Bangkok International Airport— and the real test began.

✦✦✦✦✦✦✦

“What am I hearing?” said Roshan Ara sharply as she entered the room, a bowl of rice trembling slightly in her hands.

Nazli, who had been helping Amin and Sharmeen with their homework, looked up, startled.

“What happened?” she asked curiously.

“I just heard that your intermediate result is out—and you’ve failed?”

“Yes,” Nazli replied quietly, “in one subject.”

All curiosity drained from her face, leaving only a composed stillness.

“Sana just called,” Roshan Ara went on, sitting down heavily. “She said, ‘Nazli’s result is out—how many subjects did she fail?’ ”

“I don’t understand,” Roshan Ara continued, shaking her head. “You were always boasting about your studies. How could you fail?”

“When I used to achieve things, I told you then,” Nazli said softly, erasing something in the notebook with slow, steady strokes of the eraser.

“Nazli Baji, my friend’s brother also failed his matric exams,” said little Sharmeen innocently, recalling something a school friend had told her.

“You used to lock yourself in your room all day before exams, studying so hard. How could you fail after that?”

Roshan Ara’s questions were reasonable, yet Nazli had no answer. She remained silent.

“So what will you do now?” Roshan Ara pressed impatiently.

“Nothing—just take the supplementary paper, then continue studying.”

Roshan Ara frowned, tapping the bowl’s edge with her spoon. “It would have been better if your engagement with Ahmer had gone through. Even Sana was surprised that he suddenly refused. She said she couldn’t understand it—he himself had asked his mother for the proposal!”

It was in Roshan Ara’s nature to grieve endlessly over what slipped from her grasp. If something failed to bend to her will, she mourned it for months—sometimes even for years—just as she still lamented her son’s marriage of choice.

“Mother, what’s the use of lamenting now?” Nazli said, gathering her courage. “Besides, I want to study further. I have no intention of becoming a kitchen manager after marriage.”

It was the first time she had spoken so openly.

Roshan Ara’s irritation flared again. “Listen,” she said sternly, “even if you don’t regret losing a good proposal, I do. I’m your mother—I have to worry about your future. And let me be clear: if another good proposal comes, I won’t reject it because of your studies. Understand?”

Nazli knew her mother’s temper was fleeting, so she didn’t take the words to heart. She turned back to the children, resuming their lessons.

A while later, as Roshan Ara rose to go to the kitchen, she found Javaid standing silently at the doorway.

“You home at this hour?” she asked in surprise.

“Your son has driven me mad,” Javaid said, breathing heavily. “He’s made some foolish decisions without telling me.”

Nazli stood, greeting him respectfully, confusion flickering across her face.

“Sit first, drink some water, and then tell us what’s wrong,” Roshan Ara said, leading him toward the veranda.

She brought a glass and a bottle. He drank, then sat in silence for a moment, gathering his thoughts.

“What happened?” she asked again, her voice tense now.

“He’s mortgaged the shop papers to the bank—for a loan. And I had no idea!”

“What? But why would Amir take a loan?”

“He says he wants to invest in business. He’s been arranging money, even talking about buying a flat.”

“But how could he do all this without asking you? And what business does he think he can run?”

“I asked him the same thing. He said, ‘You wouldn’t have agreed anyway.’ ”

Amir knew his father’s anger would subside after a few days, but his mother would never let him live in peace.

“I don’t understand why he needs a flat,” she said bitterly.

“He says he and Anita are moving there.”

At that very moment, Amir entered the room—and his misfortune was that he walked straight into the storm.

“What am I hearing?” Roshan Ara burst out. “Aren’t you ashamed to talk about leaving your parents at this age?”

Nazli, sensing the tension, came out of her room.

“And call that girl here too! I’ll ask her what problem she has in this house. Anita! Anita!”

Her voice was sharp enough that, even without being called, Anita had to appear.

“Mother, I knew you’d make a scene, so I did everything without telling you,” Amir shouted back.

“But why? What’s wrong with this house? Why do you want to break the family apart?” Roshan Ara’s voice trembled with rage.

“Because, Mother, your constant tone—your words—they hurt us.”

Anita, too, gathered courage to speak.

“And what about the pain you’ve given me?” Roshan Ara retorted. “You came into our house, remember—we didn’t bring you!”

Before Anita could reply, Javaid intervened.

“Enough, Roshan Ara! Stop this nonsense.”

“Father, that’s exactly why we’ve decided to live separately,” Amir declared firmly. “No matter what Anita does, Mother is never pleased with her.”

“Pleased? What service does she do?” Roshan Ara shouted. “She can’t even make my breakfast!”

“You’ve never given my wife the respect she deserves,” Amir said bitterly.

“You see?” Roshan Ara turned to Javaid. “These are her teachings—she’s turned my son against me!”

“Father,” Amir said, “there’s no point arguing anymore. If my wife has no respect here, I’ll take her away.”

“Then go!” Roshan Ara shouted. “Go today! Take your wife and your luggage—no one here depends on you!”

She was trembling now, her voice cracking yet fierce.

Nazli felt pity for her mother; she could see the pain hidden behind that anger. Roshan Ara was watching her only son slip away before her eyes.

Amir, hardened by frustration, no longer felt remorse.

“Amir, you should have talked to us before making any decision,” Javaid said, trying to reason with him. “You’ve taken a loan—how will you repay it? And what kind of flat can you buy with that money?”

“Half the amount was given to Anita as a gift by her father,” Amir replied.

“They should have given the whole price, then,” Roshan Ara muttered bitterly. “Now I see why you always take her side.”

“You made a mistake giving him the shop in his name,” she told Javaid. “Thank God you didn’t put the house in his name too, or he’d have mortgaged that as well.”

“Father, don’t worry,” Amir said. “I’ll pay the loan somehow. You should be happy that I’m building property.”

“Property?” she snapped. “With borrowed money—and your in-laws’ charity?”

“Amir,” Javaid said, shaking his head, “you’re too young. You can’t take such decisions alone. The shop barely earns enough to feed one household, let alone two—and now there’s the bank loan too. If you default, they’ll take the shop through court.”

“Nothing of that sort will happen. I’m talking to some furniture brands—we’ll get big orders soon. Don’t worry.”

“I can’t just sit easy,” Javaid replied. “I have age and experience—you don’t.”

“Why worry?” Roshan Ara interjected scornfully. “His in-laws will pay the loan. He has no ability of his own.”

“For heaven’s sake, Mother!” Amir shouted. “You two are impossible!”

“Four pennies from her father, and he’s bought your loyalty,” Roshan Ara hissed, storming off.

Javaid held his head in despair; Amir and Anita withdrew to their room.

Nazli, who had watched it all silently, turned back quietly and resumed teaching the children.

✦✦✦

“Did you see now?” Roshan Ara cried, tears streaming down her face. “Do you see the game that girl has played? You were the one who insisted so much on Amir’s marriage to her!”

She was weeping bitterly as she spoke to Javaid.

No matter how much she cursed her son or daughter-in-law, she was still deeply wounded.

“You’re not blameless either, Roshan Ara,” Javaid replied heavily. “You never accepted Amir’s wife—not for a single day. Your attitude has played a major part in all of this.”

“You just keep blaming me,” she sobbed. “It’s my fate that’s cursed.”

“Then accept it as your fate,” Javaid said patiently. “When your own son doesn’t wish to stay with you, why curse that girl? Let it be, Roshan Ara.”

“She’s bewitched him—filled his ears against me!”

“Enough!” Javaid snapped. “She’s no witch, and your son’s no child. If you could fill his ears, why didn’t you?”

“Your siding with them has brought us to this day!” Roshan Ara wailed.

She could blame anyone in the world but never herself.

“Every good and bad day comes only from Allah,” Javaid said quietly. “Our trials come from our own deeds. When will you understand that? Stop this crying now.”

“I only ever get bad news!” Roshan Ara lamented. “Nazli’s fine proposal was turned down—and before I could recover from that grief, this disaster has come!”

“It’s all written by fate,” Javaid said, rolling up his sleeves for ablution. “Pray for better days instead of complaining.”

“I have no objection to him buying a flat,” she muttered, “but I’m afraid we won’t be able to repay that loan.”

“Why should you worry about that?” he replied. “Whoever gave half the money can give the rest too. That girl must have complained to her father until he decided to get them their own home.”

“Stop thinking about it now,” Javaid said as he left for prayer. “Whatever time they have left in this house, treat them well.”

He had learned all his life to make peace with circumstances; Roshan Ara, in contrast, was ruled entirely by her emotions.

“Do you know when Amir is moving?” she asked, her voice trembling, as though she dreaded the answer.

“In a month, maybe less. Once the flat’s papers are complete, he’ll shift. Don’t worry—he’ll still be in the same city. He can visit whenever he likes.”

“That’s easy for you to say!” she cried. “He’ll still be with you at the shop all day, but my son—my son will be away from my eyes!”

Her voice broke again as tears welled up.

“I’m going to pray now,” Javaid said, unwilling to prolong the conversation.

As soon as he left, Sana entered the house and went straight to her mother. Seeing her, Nazli also came and sat nearby.

Roshan Ara repeated to them everything she had just told Javaid.

“Ammi,” said Sana gently after listening, “I think Baba’s right. Instead of blaming Anita Bhabhi, we should hold Amir Bhai responsible for all this.”

“But how will he pay that bank loan now?” she added worriedly. “With the shop’s income, he can’t possibly manage two households and the instalments. He’s acted so foolishly.”

“That’s what I’ve been saying,” Roshan Ara complained, “but no one listens to me.”

“And if he fails to pay,” Sana went on, “the bank can seize the shop or drag him to court.”

“God forbid!” Nazli gasped. “Don’t even say such terrible things.”

“If that girl and her father hadn’t misled him, Amir would never have done this,” Roshan Ara said, pressing her temples.

“Well, Mother, what’s done is done,” Nazli said softly. “Now just pray that everything turns out for the best.”

✦✦✦

After disembarking from the plane at Bangkok Airport, Zain passed through every procedure and security check miraculously — with complete ease and success. Yet Salar’s craving for drugs had already begun to manifest in strange, uncontrollable ways. His behaviour turned erratic, his body trembling, his eyes feverish. To any onlooker, it would seem as though he were shivering from some terrible fever. Leaning toward Zain and Adeel, he whispered hoarsely the reason behind his trembling. Hearing it, Zain felt a wave of unease. A dreadful thought crossed his mind — what if suspicion arose and they were caught in some trouble?

“Salar, control yourself,” Zain said, gripping his friend’s shoulder firmly as they stood together in the long immigration line.

“I can’t control it… yes, once we’re out, everything will be fine.”

Salar’s words came through chattering teeth, his face pale, drenched in sweat.

It was the first time Zain had ever seen him in such a state. Back in Pakistan, Salar had always kept himself supplied with the drug — never once had Zain witnessed the horrors of his withdrawal.

“What’s supposed to happen once we get outside?” Zain asked, unable to understand his words.

“Just leave it for now,” Salar muttered, clutching his stomach.

“All right — but at least behave properly before the security officers. If they ask anything, say you’re running a fever,” Zain instructed.

“Zain, shut your nonsense for now!” Salar snapped, his voice rasping. His head spun violently, his body almost collapsing forward.

Zain’s words seemed to him like nothing but meaningless noise.

Zain and Adeel exchanged worried glances. They both wished, at that very moment, that they could separate themselves entirely from Salar, for his condition was quickly drawing unwanted attention. After nearly an hour of standing, the three finally passed through all stages of immigration and security. Now they were waiting at the conveyor belt to collect their luggage.

But Zain could not ignore the feeling that two Bangkok Airport security officers were watching them — continuously, deliberately.

“Salar, please, control yourself,” Zain murmured through clenched teeth. “You really look like an addict right now, and security is watching us.”

“Man, if I’d known he was going to pull this stunt, I’d never have booked my ticket with him!” Adeel whispered fearfully, glancing toward Salar.

“Go to hell, both of you!” Salar growled, crouching down on his knees, his eyes blazing, his arms wrapped tightly around his body as though freezing.

“Keep quiet, otherwise you’ll get caught,” Zain whispered again, panic rising in his voice.

Nearby passengers were beginning to notice. Some pointed subtly, whispering in their own language. Yet most turned away — not yet fully attentive to the unfolding scene.

“Is he all right? Any problem with you people?” A flat-faced security officer had suddenly appeared before them, his question in broken English slicing through the air.

Zain froze. He had noticed the same officer circling the baggage area earlier, his sharp eyes following their every movement. His sudden approach made Zain’s heartbeat quicken. Salar remained on his knees, trembling violently, his forehead glistening with sweat.

“Yes, he’s perfectly fine, nothing to worry about,” Zain said quickly, forcing an uneasy smile.

The officer studied Salar carefully, then glanced at Zain, smiled faintly, and walked away — but continued speaking into his wireless radio, all the while throwing glances in their direction.

“You idiot! You’ll get us all killed!” Adeel hissed, unable to restrain himself any longer.

At long last, their luggage appeared on the conveyor belt. Zain and Adeel almost sighed in relief, feeling as though their lives had been returned to them. They lifted Salar by his shoulders and half-dragged him toward the main exit of the airport. As they stepped through the outer terminal doors, a dense crowd met them — people waiting to receive relatives, drivers holding placards, tourists pushing trolleys. But to Zain and Adeel, it felt as though every eye in that crowd was fixed solely upon them. Hurrying through the mass of people, Zain pushed their baggage trolley toward a corner of the terminal and parked it there.

“Adeel, until I arrange a cab, you handle him,” Zain said, breathless, his hands trembling.

“No, no — you stay here, Zain. Don’t go,” Salar cried, his voice thick with desperation.

Zain couldn’t understand what he meant.

Suddenly, Salar lunged forward, grabbing Zain’s arm tightly. The next moment, both of them stumbled and fell to the ground together. As Zain tried to rise, Salar’s hands tore at his belt — frenzied, unrestrained. In fury, Zain struck him across the face with his fist.

“Give me that belt — now!” Salar screamed wildly, writhing like a man possessed.

He clutched Zain’s belt with such force that Zain could not free himself. Adeel tried to pull Salar away, but it was useless. Salar was out of his mind.

“There’s heroin in that belt! Give it to me, please!” he shouted — his voice breaking, desperate, trembling.

It felt as though a mountain had collapsed upon Zain. For a few seconds, he was frozen — stunned, hollow, staring in disbelief. The surrounding crowd erupted into murmurs. Within moments, uniformed airport security officers rushed toward them. Two men grabbed Zain by the arms, while another pair restrained Salar. Even then, Salar fought violently, trying to lunge toward Zain’s belt. His eyes rolled back, his body convulsing from withdrawal.

“Heroin in the belt...” he kept muttering, the words spilling out of his mouth in a broken rhythm, loud enough for everyone nearby to understand. Among the officers was the same flat-faced man who had been observing them for long. The words “belt” and “heroin” were not hard for him to comprehend.

Zain stood speechless, his world collapsing, as the officers surrounded them.

✦✦✦

The three were taken at once to the interrogation room. Zain’s belt was seized and placed under the scanner. The result appeared on the screen immediately — hidden within the belt’s lining was a dense streak that the officers instantly recognized. The belt’s stitching was cut open with a blade, and a small plastic pouch slid out. Fine white powder trickled from it to the floor. Zain’s legs began to tremble. Salar started vomiting violently. Medical staff were called in for emergency examination, and it was revealed that Salar was in severe heroin withdrawal. His body had reached its breaking point. The confiscated heroin was weighed carefully. Every grain counted.

All three men's belongings — bags, wallets, passports — were confiscated. Each item was re-scanned, their luggage emptied, and drug-sniffing dogs brought in for final inspection. No other traces of narcotics were found.

"This isn't my belt," Zain said desperately, trying to compose himself before the officers.

The Thai officials exchanged brief words among themselves, their expressions unreadable.

"In Bangkok, the punishment for drug smuggling is death," one flat-faced officer said coldly, his English halting but his meaning crystal clear.

A confession statement, written in Thai, was placed before Zain. He was ordered to sign.

"Why should I sign when I haven't smuggled any drugs?" Zain shouted, his voice breaking. "Look at his condition — he's the addict, not me! He deceived me!"

He pointed at Salar, but no one seemed willing to believe him. The officers shouted, gestured, argued, and demanded he sign. But Zain refused. Since nothing substantial could be proven against Adeel, he was released the same evening. Frightened beyond measure, Adeel vanished from Bangkok. The next day, he bought a ticket back to Pakistan and fled — unwilling to be associated with the case, unwilling to be questioned. Even after returning home, he told no one the truth — neither Zain's family, nor Salar's. To speak would have meant confessing his own part, his own presence. Silence was easier, safer. He assumed that the two arrested men would somehow inform their families themselves.

✦✦✦

A few hours later, Zain and Salar were handed over to the police.

Both were handcuffed, dragged through the terminal, and pushed into the back of a police van like common criminals.

"You lied to me, Salar. You deceived me!" Zain shouted, furious and helpless.

Salar heard nothing. He was far gone — his body consumed by torment, his mind fractured by the pain of deprivation. They were taken to a police station and locked together in a single, foul-smelling cell with other prisoners. During questioning, Zain was made to fill out a form listing his family's details in Pakistan. It took ten days for the Bangkok police to send that information to the Pakistani Embassy. A day later, both men were formally transferred from police custody to the central prison.

In prison, they were separated into different cells. For Zain, it was the darkest period of his entire life. He was paying the price for a crime he had not committed — betrayed by someone he himself had never betrayed. Behind those iron bars, time ceased to move. That first night, he sat motionless on the floor, numb, his mind blank. Around half past eight, a food tray slid through the bars. Startled, he looked up — only then realizing the cacophony that filled the prison: the ceaseless clamour of voices, the metallic clang of locks, the heavy footsteps of guards echoing in endless rhythm. The air was thick, suffocating. Sweat clung to his skin. At home, he had never spent a night without air-conditioning. Now he sat in a narrow concrete box, with only enough space to lie down on a coarse mattress spread across a stone slab. In one corner stood a small toilet and a rusted sink. The air reeked of decay. From the cells nearby, he could hear intermittent cries and groans — sounds of suffering that rose and fell through the night. Perhaps one of them was Salar — his heels scraping against the prison floor, his body convulsing in agony. Zain closed his eyes, but the cries pierced him still.

That night he did not sleep — nor the next, nor the next after that. Each night, his entire life unfolded before him like a film — every lie, every prideful moment, every cruelty replaying before his eyes. He thought of those who had suffered pain because of him, of anyone whose heart he might ever have broken, knowingly or unknowingly. And somewhere deep inside, a voice began to whisper: Perhaps it was someone's prayer — someone's tear — that has brought you here. Then another voice echoed, clear and familiar: "I haven't slept for many nights, Zain..." He knew whose voice it was.

"I was so worried, Zain, when I couldn't reach you..."

The memory struck like lightning.

"I haven't slept for many nights, Zain..."

Once again, the same words... the same tone...

"All that you did to me — I leave it to my Allah."

And then, before his mind's eye, a face appeared — familiar, innocent, unbearably pure. A face framed by quiet sorrow.

Nazli.

For the first time in his life, tears welled up in Zain's eyes — not for himself, but for the girl whose pain had followed him across continents, into darkness, and now into this very cell.

✦✦✦✦✦

Tazeen slowly opened the door and entered, a tray of tea balanced carefully in her hands. Moments earlier, Athar Mirza's physiotherapist had left after completing his usual session. Though not afflicted with any grave illness, the doctor had advised continuing physiotherapy to ease the stiffness in his joints. She walked softly toward the bed where Athar Mirza lay with his eyes closed, appearing fast asleep. Her heart, however, was gripped by that constant anxiety which had lately become her only companion. She placed the tray gently upon the side table and bent over him, studying his face with quiet dread. Just as she leaned close, Athar Mirza's eyes opened suddenly—and it was Tazeen, not he, who was startled.

"Not yet. There's still a little time left, perhaps," he murmured in a frail, wavering voice. Even his speech no longer carried the firmness and fluency it once did. At eighty-two, though spared from major illness, old age had earned its right to steal the vigour from his tone.

"You were frightened—you thought I'd gone, didn't you?" Athar Mirza said, smiling faintly.

"Papa, God forbid, why would I think such a thing? I made this tea myself. Sameena kept insisting she would, but I wanted to prepare it with my own hands."

Lovingly, she brushed her hand across his forehead.

Athar Mirza rose slowly to sit up, and she handed him a cup before taking one for herself and settling upon the chair beside his bed.

"Tazeen, my child, your son is grown now. After me, he will take good care of you. Why do you remain so worried about me all the time?" he asked tenderly, enclosing her hand in his weathered palm.

"Papa, when did I ever say I'm worried because of you?" she replied, her face carrying an almost playful look of surprise.

"Your eyes tell me every day. You look at me, but your thoughts drift elsewhere. You fear the wrinkles of my age, for deep inside you know—you will lose me soon."

He spoke falteringly but with gentle calm. Tazeen did not interrupt. Her eyes filled on their own.

“But, my child, that is the law of this world. One by one, even the truest bonds must part. Perhaps my role in your life was only this much. Now I too wish to take leave.”

“Papa, what are you saying?”

Her father’s tone struck a hidden fear she had long carried—the dread that she would lose him.

“And then,” he continued softly, “through every difficult path of your life, you found your papa beside you. Now, by Allah’s grace, there is someone younger, stronger to support you.”

It had been years since he spoke with such emotion.

“Oh Papa, please—no one can take your place. Not even my own child.”

Tears streamed freely down her cheeks.

“This old man has nothing left to give, my dear. All that I could offer—my words, my counsel—I have already left with you. I wish to have this house valued, give Imran his share before my eyes, and transfer the property in your name. After me, you will live here in peace.”

His grip on her hand tightened.

“Papa, what has come over you today? Why are you saying all this? It’s the people who make a house, not its walls. Without you, even this home would feel like ruins. For me, this house is nothing without you.”

“Even without me,” he said with a tired smile, “this house will remain the dearest place in the world. You were born here, grew up here, and by Allah’s command, have spent your life within these walls.”

A sudden cough seized him. Tazeen sprang up to fetch water, but Athar Mirza motioned her to sit.

“Tazeen, my child,” he whispered, “sometimes I marvel at how great a planner Allah is. In the final days of my life, look—there is no one beside me except you. If you ever made a difficult choice in life, see how it has turned out for your good.”

“Absolutely. I’ve learned so much from hardship,” Tazeen replied after a pause.

“My child, forgive your brother from your heart.”

“Papa, when did I ever say I haven’t forgiven Imran?”

“You’ve never said it, but I know. Even after seventeen years, you still haven’t forgotten your brother’s attitude.”

He looked at her long and kindly.

“Sensitive souls like you keep gathering all the stones others hurl at them. That is how the burden of sorrow grows heavier—and you have done the same. But see, time itself has proved you were right, and he was wrong.”

Tazeen’s voice came quiet and reflective.

“Papa, the first lesson life ever taught me was that even your own blood stands with you only when your life appears perfect. But when they sense you’re in trouble, they take another road—lest misfortune touch them too.”

“I understand,” he said softly, “yet blood ties do not dissolve so easily. Even now, I can say with certainty that if ever Imran is in pain, you will still feel it—his sorrow will reach you.”

She gave a bitter smile.

“Yes, I’ll care. But the strange thing is, Papa, when I was in pain, he felt nothing. That’s why he kept away. And most of all—I never asked him for help.”

“My child, he is your brother. He neglected his old parents too, but what can I do? He is my blood. Even as a father, I cannot rebuke him. How can I tell him, ‘You never thought of me in my old age,’ when I fulfilled every duty toward him?”

Tears shimmered in his dim eyes, and Tazeen saw them.

“It isn’t old age that weakens a man, my child,” he murmured. “It is life’s failures, disappointments, and regrets that make him frail. When life has no more pain left to give, the soul takes its final breath and leaves the cage of the body.”

“Papa, please—why are you talking like this today? You’re worrying me,” she said, anxious now.

“My child, listen. When I leave this world, I want you and Imran to come together once—remove every grudge from your hearts. At this final moment, no advice is better than this. Perhaps my counsel will cleanse you both.” He had never spoken of this before. Over the years, Imran’s visits from America had grown fewer—his distance greater. When Bilqees was alive, he came often; after her passing, rarely. Athar Mirza did not want that estrangement to survive him.

“Papa, don’t worry. You’ve done so much for me—won’t I at least fulfill this small wish of yours? I promise I’ll meet my brother without resentment all my life. Please, don’t burden yourself with it anymore.”

She smiled faintly and kissed his hand.

“Bless you, my child. I’ve already spoken to Imran about this house; he has no objection. He’ll be here in a few days. I’ve had my lawyer write my will—I haven’t much time left.”

“Papa, please, don’t frighten me. None of this matters—your life and health mean more to me than anything.”

“You must learn to face this fear, Tazeen. After me, you’ll have to be brave.” He still smiled, but the glimmer of life was dimming from his eyes.

“Please, Papa, don’t say such things. There’s no one in this world for me except you.”

Her voice trembled, for every word he spoke was true.

“My child, you have Kashan. You are fortunate—your son is dutiful and kind. He is learned too. Not every parent is blessed with such a child.”

“Papa, please rest now. I have a few calls to make to the boutique—see how work is going there.”

She adjusted his pillow, drew the sheet over him tenderly, and stepped out. His words echoed in her mind as she closed the door. Athar Mirza lay back with his eyes shut, his heart lighter than it had felt in years. He had finally unburdened all that had weighed on his soul. And when that heaviness left him, he slept in peace—so deeply that he never woke again.

His spirit took flight.

✦✦✦✦✦✦

When Afzal reached Bangkok, twenty days had already passed since Zain’s imprisonment. Except for his secretary, Waseem, he had brought no one else. Upon arrival, Afzal began gathering information about Zain from airport security, struggling against the wall of the Thai language. After visiting several police stations, he finally discovered the name and address of the prison where Zain was held. It took an entire day.

The next morning, he reached the jail before visiting hours, waiting outside an hour in advance. Bangkok's strict regulations required long paperwork, but at last, around nine o'clock, permission was granted for him to meet his son. Visitors could only communicate through telephone booths separated by glass partitions. No one was allowed direct contact with prisoners, for fear that forbidden items might pass from hand to hand. When Afzal reached his assigned booth, a distance of twenty steps separated him from Zain. Through the thick glass, he could barely see his son. Bright sunlight struck the panel, turning the figures behind it into blurred silhouettes.

"Hello, hello!" Afzal called, restless, stepping slightly aside to catch a clearer glimpse. Around him, voices merged into a clamorous din—like a fish market.

"Hello, my son Zain!" he cried helplessly.

"Dad!"

The sound reached him faint and broken, yet unmistakable. Afzal darted from the booth, pressing close to the glass.

"Zain! Speak, Zain!" His voice quivered with emotion.

"Dad, take me from here, Dad, please!"

On the other side, Zain was weeping openly.

"I haven't done anything—believe me, Dad!"

All of Afzal's past grievances dissolved in that instant. Seeing his son reduced to such misery, he could no longer hold back his tears.

"Don't worry, Zain, my child," he said in a choked voice.

"Dad, this is a horrible place. I haven't slept for many nights, Dad—please save me."

Zain's words, muffled through static, seemed to rise from the depths of a well. Even amid the surrounding noise, their pain pierced Afzal's heart like iron. Zain crouched down in despair, sobbing. His body was frail, his spirit broken. The sleepless nights, the shrill waking of prisoners at dawn—he endured all as a shadow among the living.

"Dad, I didn't do anything. They will kill me—I don't want to face the firing squad!"

"No, my son, no! I won't let you die—hello, hello!"

But a harsh tone interrupted—the continuous beep of disconnection. At the same moment, the prison bell rang, ending visiting hours.

Afzal stood there, weeping, caught between grief and helplessness. Beyond the glass, prisoners in dull uniforms formed lines under the guards' whistles, marching away. He tried to spot Zain, but the figures blurred together, lost in the brightness. Never in his life had Afzal felt so powerless—so broken.

The words Zain had cried still echoed through his mind:

"Dad, I didn't do anything. They will kill me."

"Dad, I haven't slept for many nights—save me."

Calls from Huma kept coming from Pakistan, but Afzal lied gently, telling her that Zain was safe, that his release was near. He knew her fragile heart could not bear the truth. He had not brought her with him for the same reason—if he had to manage her grief, he would not be able to fight for Zain. That night, he and Waseem devised a plan. Through a friend's cousin in Bangkok—Ikram Akhtar, a well-known businessman—they sought help. Ikram, a kind man of forty, guided Afzal through the legal labyrinth, translating, arranging meetings, and introducing a capable lawyer, Santosh. After Santosh's first interview with Zain, the full story was laid bare. Yet even then, Afzal's faith wavered. His son had deceived him so often in the past that belief itself had grown tired. Still, he said nothing; whether lie or truth, he prayed it might somehow work to Zain's salvation. When Zain was brought before the Bangkok Criminal Court, his wrists were bound in handcuffs. His beard had grown, his face gaunt. Seeing him, Afzal's breath caught, but he hid his anguish and placed a trembling hand upon his son's head.

"Nothing will happen, my son. Everything will be all right."

Zain said nothing. His silence was the silence of one whose mind had broken before his body.

Soon the guards led him inside the courtroom. Afzal, forbidden entry, watched from behind the railing while Santosh pleaded in rapid Thai before the judge. He argued that the heroin found on Zain weighed only a few milligrams, and that the boy had never intended to sell it. But each sentence of the judge's reply, echoing through translation, sounded to Zain like a death sentence. The trial dragged on in dreadful quiet—the kind of silence heavier than sound, the silence of waiting for a verdict that could end a life.

And when at last the judge spoke, the decision astonished them all—even the lawyer himself.

✦✦✦✦✦✦

Kashan stood in the international arrivals lounge, scanning the crowd of passengers emerging from the gates. Every middle-aged man of about fifty who walked out with his wife seemed, for a fleeting moment, to resemble his uncle — Imran. The familiar image from long ago had blurred with time. In all of Athar Mirza's journeys to America over the years, neither Tazeen nor Kashan had ever received a photograph that might help him recognize what his uncle looked like now. What remained vivid in memory was not a face but an attitude — a cold indifference that even in childhood Kashan had felt in Imran's words, in his distant manner, in the faint bitterness that had lingered after his visits.

The flight had landed exactly on schedule. Still, Imran and Maria were taking long to emerge — perhaps seated in the rear rows, perhaps delayed at baggage claim. As soon as they learned of Athar Mirza's passing, they had taken the earliest flight to Karachi. Through all those years, they had visited Pakistan only once every two or three years while Bilqees was alive; afterwards, the connection had faded to polite calls and rare letters. More often, it was Athar who made the journey — at Imran's polite invitation, which carried both affection and distance.

Each year, Imran sent air tickets, and each year his father accepted — not out of desire, but out of duty, knowing that his son's "busy schedule" left little space for sentiment.

Athar Mirza, dignified in restraint, never demanded more. And perhaps because he never asked, Imran never felt guilt for meeting his father barely once a year — if that. Yet now, standing in Karachi once more, Imran felt an ache that burned like a belated shame. His father had died without letting him know that death had been lingering so near.

"Kashan! How are you, my son?"

The voice came suddenly, close to his ear. Kashan turned — and at once recognized him. Despite the years, there was something unmistakable in the bearing of his uncle and in Maria's familiar composure beside him.

Smiling warmly, Kashan greeted them both and stepped forward to embrace Imran.

“Did Tazeen come with you, or have you come alone?” Imran asked, his hand brushing affectionately over Kashan’s hair.

“No, I came alone. There’s still a constant stream of visitors at home offering condolences. Mama stays busy all day these days.”

“Of course,” Imran nodded gently. Kashan reached for their luggage.

“Please give me the bags, Mamun. Wait here a moment — I’ll bring the car around.”

He walked away quickly, pushing the trolley through the glass doors.

“Kashan has grown up now,” Maria said quietly, watching him vanish into the parking area.

“Yes, Papa had told me he’s studying medicine — he must have completed his degree by now,” Imran replied.

“Of course. He was only two years older than our daughter, Aleena,” Maria reflected aloud.

“Yes… perhaps,” Imran murmured, lost in thought.

A few minutes later Kashan drove up to the curb. They entered the car, and he guided it smoothly out of the airport gates.

✦✦✦✦✦✦

“Zain has been sentenced to six months’ imprisonment,” Afzal informed Huma over the phone that evening.

He had just returned to the hotel room after spending the whole day in court.

“Six months? How can that be possible?” Huma cried, her voice breaking.

“Be thankful it’s only six months. The quantity of heroin recovered from him was small — otherwise, it would have been a clear case of capital punishment.”

“What will Zain do now? How will he live there?” she sobbed.

“The same way every prisoner lives,” Afzal said flatly. The exhaustion of weeks had hollowed his tone. Yet inside, he felt the faintest relief: at least the camel had knelt upon one side — the worst had been averted.

“I don’t care — I’m coming to Bangkok now. I want to meet Zain,” Huma declared through her tears.

“All right, book your flight. But neither you nor I can stay for six months. We’ll have to return to Pakistan after a few days.”

“No, I’ll stay. Zain will need me,” she said in anguish.

“How is that possible, Huma? Try to be sensible. Anyway, I have a terrible headache. Book your flight and let me know afterward.”

He ended the call, weary and wordless.

Huma sat crying for a long time. The arrival of her elder daughter, Aiza, from London had been her only consolation. Hearing the sobs from her mother’s room, Aiza entered swiftly.

“What happened, Ammi? Why are you crying?”

“Afzal just called. Zain’s been sentenced to six months in prison.”

“But that’s — in a way — good news,” Aiza said hesitantly. “We feared much worse.”

“Yes... but even six months isn’t a short time. I only want to go to him as soon as possible.”

“Then go, Ammi. Zain must also be waiting to see you,” Aiza said, holding her mother’s hand.

A week later, Huma stood before Afzal in the Bangkok hotel room.

Both looked worn and defeated — their faces the colour of sleeplessness.

“Isn’t there any way to have the sentence reduced?” she asked, though she already knew the answer.

“When a court has spoken, how can the case be reopened? Be patient, Huma. One way or another, Zain will have to serve these six months.”

Her lips quivered. “Zain didn’t lie. He has nothing to do with drugs.”

Afzal sighed. “That’s hard to say, Huma. You know your son — he has lied too many times.”

“Yes, but not this time. My heart tells me so.”

“Because of him, I’ve endured humiliation everywhere,” Afzal muttered bitterly. “The news is spreading: Afzal’s son caught smuggling drugs.”

“Zain is suffering in there, and you’re worried about gossip?” Huma’s tone cut like a blade.

“He’s there because of his own foolishness! Who told him to run away and stay missing without a word?”

Huma said nothing. Shame and pain bound her tongue.

Then Afzal, in the cruelty of exhaustion, added the words that struck her like a physical blow:

“Huma, your son can never be like Aiza and Nabeel — because his mother is you, not Sumbul.”

It was as if he had pushed her from the twenty-sixth floor of that hotel. She sat for a long time, silent, tears sliding down her face. When at last the intercom bell rang, she did not move. Afzal had already left — gone out without her noticing. The phone kept ringing, but there was no message in the world left for her to hope for. Zain would spend six months in a Bangkok prison — and Huma, though free, now felt like a prisoner herself, bound by shame and love, condemned beside her son.

And Afzal — as always — had made sure she bore that guilt alone.

✦✦✦

“So that means you managed to get only four million rupees from the bank?”

Ikram turned the cheque over and over in his hand.

“Yes, Uncle,” Amir replied casually, dipping a biscuit in his tea. “You already know that’s what our shop’s worth. It’s an old area. But it’s enough for the machinery.”

Ikram sighed with satisfaction.

“By the way,” he continued, “Anita told me you told your father you mortgaged the shop just to buy a house for yourselves.”

“Well, if I’d said I took the loan to invest in your business, Dad wouldn’t have liked it,” Amir admitted candidly.

“All right, fine. Whatever you think best. I’ll finish the paperwork soon, and then we’ll import the machinery.”

“Don’t worry, Uncle. I’ll work alongside you, and you’ll see how much profit we make.”

“That’s what I hope, my boy. I have no son of my own except Anita. You’re my son-in-law — there’s no one I can trust more. I want you to stand beside me in business.”

“Of course, Uncle. You’re as respectable to me as my own father,” Amir said with easy charm.

“I even want you both to move upstairs — live on the upper floor of my house. What’s the point of renting such a small flat?”

“For now, let’s leave that,” Amir frowned slightly. “At home, I’ve already told them I needed a separate place. If I tell them the truth now, what will I say?”

“Well,” Ikram chuckled, exhaling smoke, “once you start earning more here than from your shop, your father will understand.”

“That’s exactly what I’m waiting for,” Amir smiled.

✦✦✦

When Kashan brought Imran and Maria home from the airport, he found Tazeen in the TV lounge, reciting the Qur’an. Since Athar Mirza’s passing, she had taken solace in those recitations for his soul’s peace. It had been years — seventeen long years — since brother and sister last sat face to face. During all that time, Imran had never inquired about Tazeen’s life or troubles, believing she had chosen her own path. And Tazeen had never sought her brother’s help. Between them stood the cold, invisible wall that their father had died watching.

“How are you, Tazeen?” Imran asked softly after returning her greeting.

“By Allah’s grace,” she replied in a low voice.

Maria stepped forward, embraced her warmly, and they all sat together. Kashan, with Fazal Deen’s help, brought in the luggage.

“It’s been ten days, yet people still come every day to offer condolences,” Tazeen said, unsure how to begin.

Imran nodded. “Papa never let me know how bad his health had become.”

“He wasn’t ill, really,” Tazeen said gently. “He just grew terribly lonely after Mama’s death.”

Maria’s eyes wandered about the room. “The house feels so silent without him.”

“Yes,” Tazeen whispered. “Since Mama passed, sorrow never left these walls. Papa became very quiet — which was unlike him.”

“Mamun, shall we have dinner? It’s already late,” Kashan suggested.

“Yes, of course. Everything’s ready — we just need to heat it,” Tazeen said, rising.

“I don’t really feel like eating, do you, Maria?” Imran asked.

“Not much, we had food on the flight,” she replied.

“Even so, please eat a little,” Tazeen insisted, heading toward the kitchen.

“And you, Kashan,” Imran asked, “how’s your education going?”

“My convocation was recent. I’ve finished medical school — planning to begin residency now.”

“Mashallah,” Imran smiled, impressed.

For a moment, his mind drifted seventeen years back — to the day he’d seen the boy at a small clinic, the day Tazeen’s divorce became final. He remembered what he had said to his father then:

“Papa, whether you agree or not, because of my sister’s wrong decision, this child will suffer.”

And Athar Mirza’s calm reply:

“How can you say that with such certainty?”

But Imran had insisted, “Look at him — withdrawn, unlike my own children. He’ll never manage his studies.”

“Mamun, how are Wasif and Adeel? What are they doing?” Kashan’s question pulled him back to the present.

“Wasif works at a restaurant, and Adeel… still looking for a job,” Imran answered, hiding embarrassment.

“And Aleena?” Kashan smiled.

“She’s completed her law degree — about to start working,” Maria replied with pride.

“That’s wonderful,” Kashan said warmly.

After dinner, they withdrew to their room. A knock came — Kashan again.

“I just wanted to ask if you need anything.”

“My son, this is our home,” Imran smiled. “If we need something, we’ll say so.”

“Maybe because it’s been years, you’re treating us like guests,” Maria teased.

“Oh no, you’re family,” Kashan said politely. “I’ll have a water bottle sent up — Fazal Deen must’ve forgotten.”

When he left, Imran sat back thoughtfully.

“It feels good to meet Kashan after so long — such a well-mannered boy.”

“Yes,” Maria agreed. “In fact, I’ve been thinking ever since I saw him…”

“About what?”

“What do you think — wouldn’t Kashan be suitable for our Aleena?”

Maria smiled, speaking aloud the very thought Imran had silently been holding.

✦✦✦

Nazli stood before the mirror, cast a fleeting glance at her reflection, then reached for her purse and was about to leave the room when Roshan Ara entered.

“Where are you going, all dressed up?” her mother asked immediately, stepping into the room.

“I’m going to college — I need to get some information about the supplementary exams,” Nazli replied without looking up.

“But you told me you had no intention of continuing your studies?” Roshan Ara asked in her habitual, matter-of-fact tone.

“Yes, I said wrong. I was foolish,” Nazli answered simply, fastening the clasp of her purse.

“Your father’s fever just won’t go down,” her mother said with weary concern. “I’m really worried now.”

“I gave him his medicine with breakfast, Ammi. Insha’Allah, he’ll feel better by evening.”

“I’m afraid, though — in his absence, I don’t know whether Amir even goes to check on the shop or not.”

“Then call Amir bhai and tell him to take care of the shop,” Nazli suggested calmly.

“I won’t call him! Since he left, he hardly ever comes to see his parents. Who knows where he wanders all day.”

“He’s taken a flat near his in-laws’ house — ours is far. How can he come every day?” Nazli said, supplying the information in a quiet tone.

Roshan Ara looked at her sharply. “And how do you know his flat is near his in-laws’?”

“I called Anita Bhabhi — she told me herself,” Nazli replied carelessly.

“But why did you call that witch?” Roshan Ara exclaimed angrily.

“Ammi, she’s neither a witch nor a sorceress. Stop blaming her for taking Amir bhai away. Whoever wants to leave, just leaves — that’s all.”

Nazli adjusted her dupatta over her head as she moved toward the door.

“That girl can never be good for me!” Roshan Ara cried, her voice trembling. “She took my son away from me — do you understand?”

“One day you’ll understand what I mean, Ammi. Anyway, I’m leaving now.”

“When will you be back?” Roshan Ara asked, watching her daughter go.

“I’m only going to college — I’ll be back soon. Give Baba his medicine again in the afternoon. Khuda Hafiz.”

Nazli’s voice faded as she stepped out.

Slowly, Nazli had begun to return to life. The first step she took was dusting off her books. And as she did, she began to see clearly how many things around her had changed — or perhaps, how many she had failed to notice before. For months she had lived in another world — a world where no sound reached her except one, no image appeared before her except one face. But now, gradually, the fog was lifting. She stood leaning against a corridor pillar, waiting for Professor Najeeb’s class to end. It was the same college, the same corridor, the same hum of students — but she herself felt like a stranger returned from exile. Only a year ago, she too had sat in these classrooms, listening to the same lectures, scribbling notes with a heart full of dreams. Nazli looked toward the college ground; her thoughts stirred like restless birds, and she turned her gaze away.

After a while, Professor Najeeb emerged from class — and the first face he saw was Nazli’s.

“Oh, Nazli! What are you doing here? Waiting for someone?” he asked, smiling in his familiar, good-natured way.

“Sir, I was waiting for your class to end — I wanted to talk to you,” she said with hesitation.

“Of course. Would you prefer to talk here, or shall we go to my office?”

“Wherever you think best,” she replied simply.

“Then come along — we’ll talk in my office,” said the professor, and Nazli followed quietly down the corridor.

Once inside, he set aside his books and turned toward her. “Now tell me, what’s the matter?”

“Sir, as I mentioned before, I failed in Physics,” Nazli said, lowering her eyes.

“Yes, you told me you failed, but not which subject. I didn’t know it was Physics,” he replied thoughtfully.

“I want to prepare for the supplementary exam properly this time,” Nazli said, her voice uncertain. “I don’t want to fail again. I want to study in such a way that I can finally pass my Intermediate.”

“I understand. After failure, one’s confidence often falters,” Professor Najeeb said, pouring himself a glass of water though his gaze remained fixed upon her.

“For now, I can’t afford private tuition,” she continued. “Would it be possible for you to help me find a trustworthy and capable teacher — or maybe a student who could guide me?”

“Nazli, you’ve been such a good student yourself,” he said warmly. “You only need a little confidence. I’m sure you’ll pass.”

“That’s not always enough, sir,” she said with a faint, sorrowful smile. “Sometimes even complete confidence in oneself doesn’t work in one’s favour.”

He nodded slowly. “At the moment, I can’t think of any teacher or student to recommend. There are a few professors, but they charge thousands for private tutoring.”

“Yes, I know, sir. That’s why I’m confused about what to do.” She bit her lip nervously.

“If I could teach Physics myself, you’d have no problem — but unfortunately, that’s not my subject,” he said with a mild laugh.

“Of course, sir,” Nazli replied softly.

“Don’t worry. I’ll try to find a solution. Call me in a couple of days and check,” he encouraged.

“All right, sir. I’ll call on your office number,” she said, rising from her seat.

“I’m glad you’re thinking of continuing your studies,” he said, smiling.

“But I never told you I’d quit studying,” she said in surprise.

“Yes, but I had the impression that you might have decided so,” the professor replied.

“No, sir — I’d just lost focus for a while. But not anymore. Anyway, I’ll go now. I’ll call you soon — it would be kind of you to help me,” Nazli said, smiling faintly as she adjusted her dupatta and turned to leave.

For a few minutes after she left, Professor Najeeb kept staring at the door through which she had gone, lost in thought — then he turned back to his papers.

✦✦✦

“You should have taken a few days of rest. Amir can manage everything at the shop,” Roshan Ara said, placing a steaming paratha upon Javaid’s plate.

“Jameel himself told me that Amir doesn’t stay at the shop for more than an hour,” Javaid replied, naming his oldest and most trusted employee.

“Then call Amir and ask him yourself — where does he disappear all day?” Roshan Ara’s voice carried both concern and a rising edge of irritation.

“He’s started working at his father-in-law’s factory too,” Javaid answered calmly.

“How do you know that?” Her surprise deepened.

“He told me himself. Said he’d learn factory work — and then earn more than the shop ever brings in,” Javaid explained patiently.

“I see. That means he’s sold himself to his father-in-law,” Roshan Ara said bitterly. “I’ll call him right now and find out.”

“There’s no need for that,” Javaid interrupted softly.

“Maybe he’s right. If he learns factory work, he might earn more. Anyway, the shop doesn’t bring in as much as it used to.” It had been months since Amir had left home, yet every day Roshan Ara cried — calling him his wife’s slave.

“If you’re sick, shouldn’t Amir care? He mortgaged this shop to take a loan from the bank!” Roshan Ara’s voice trembled. She was in no mood to listen.

“Well, I’m off now,” Javaid said after finishing his breakfast, wiping his hands and rising to his feet.

Roshan Ara looked at his frail condition — pity rising in her chest, and anger at Amir's neglect burning even more fiercely. Ignoring Javaid's counsel, she immediately dialled Amir's number, firing her questions one after another.

"Do you have any sense at all? Your old father is sick!"

"Baba knows I'm working at Anita's father's factory these days," Amir replied irritably.

"But why? Your father kept that shop for you — and you've mortgaged it to sit at your father-in-law's feet?"

"I'm not sitting at anyone's feet, Ammi.

I've invested money in the business — I didn't take that bank loan for nothing." Amir's tone grew heated — and with that, he revealed the secret he had tried so hard to keep, at least from his mother.

"What do you mean? You took the bank loan and put it into your father-in-law's factory?" Roshan Ara was struck speechless.

"Exactly. I'm their partner now," Amir said with complete confidence.

"You've lost your mind, Amir! Your sick father sits in the shop all day so that you can feed others' profits — and risk your own shop?" Roshan Ara's hands began to tremble.

"It's not a risk — it's business, Ammi. We're partners now."

"But you told us earlier you mortgaged the shop only to get a separate house!" Her tone was choked with disbelief.

"That's because you never listen — you just scold. You wouldn't have understood," Amir said carelessly.

"Then that flat you're living in — whose is it?" Another bomb exploded in her mind.

"It's a rental. Anita and I will soon move to Uncle Ikram's upper floor," he said, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"Oh God, Amir! What have you done? Who will repay this loan? If the instalments aren't paid, the bank will take the shop!" Roshan Ara's voice grew shrill with panic. She had no faith in Amir's ability.

"Who says the loan won't be repaid? We've already got a few good orders — the work's running fine. We'll start making profit soon," Amir said, trying to reassure her — but failed.

“I’m busy now, Ammi, I’ll talk later,” he said hastily and hung up.

Roshan Ara sat down, holding her head in despair.

Amir’s bank loan of four million rupees had already made Javaid deeply anxious — but he had found some peace, seeing that Amir had at least managed to pay the first two months’ instalments somehow. Javaid thought that even if Amir ever defaulted, he could sell the newly bought flat and clear the debt. But today’s revelation — that the loan money had been poured into a business — left even Roshan Ara shaken. If the investment brought no return, the bank would seize the shop.

That same evening, Roshan Ara shared all her fears with Nazli. And it was Nazli who advised her mother to tell Javaid everything. That night, neither Javaid nor Roshan Ara could sleep. Amir had trapped not only his own future but also the family’s only source of income — their shop — in his father-in-law Ikram’s business. Javaid kept lamenting the day when, out of love and pride, he had transferred the ownership of the shop to Amir’s name.

✦✦✦✦

Kashan still could not forget his accidental meeting with Nazli. Professor Najeeb had told him a few facts about her that had created in his heart a strange pull toward her. He had learned only this much — that Nazli had once loved someone deeply, but then her heart had been broken. Beyond that, Kashan knew nothing, nor did he feel much desire to know. For several days after that meeting, it became a daily ritual — Nazli’s face would appear in his mind at least once every day. It was the first time in Kashan’s life that he had been drawn to a girl to such an extent, and much of the fault lay with Nazli’s beauty. He had met many girls in his life, but none had ever been as beautiful as she.

After Athar Mirza’s passing — and the arrival of Imran and Maria from America — Kashan had, for a few days, forgotten Nazli. It was during those days that he received a call from Professor Najeeb.

“She’s quite troubled, that girl. You came to mind — someone I can trust. If you could teach her?” Professor Najeeb said, explaining everything about Nazli before concluding with this request.

“But where would I have to teach her?” Kashan asked attentively while driving his car.

“Obviously, either at the same college or perhaps in some public library — wherever both of you find convenient,” Professor Najeeb replied.

“Then please ask Miss Nazli and let me know,” Kashan said in response.

“I’ll give her your mobile number. She’ll call you sometime soon,”

Professor Najeeb said, gathering a few books from his desk before heading out for a lecture.

“All right, sir — if she calls, I’ll talk to her,” Kashan said thoughtfully.

“But only if you have the time. If not, I’ll tell her no,” Professor Najeeb added, though he was certain that even if Kashan had no time, he would never refuse him.

“These days, by chance, I have plenty of free time — otherwise, as you know, it’s hard when studies are ongoing,” Kashan replied.

“Good then — I’ll tell her to call you. Khuda Hafiz,” the professor said, placing the receiver down.

Once again, Nazli’s beautiful face flashed across Kashan’s mind like a spark — and then vanished. He began restlessly waiting for her call.

After reaching home, his attention remained fixed solely on his mobile ringtone when it would ring, and he could tell Nazli openly of his willingness to help. Two days passed, yet no call came from Nazli. Meanwhile, Imran and Maria could not stop praising Kashan. Tazeen felt immense pride in her son — though the constant admiration from Imran was somewhat surprising to her.

“Tazeen, you’ve raised your son wonderfully — I’m proud of you,”

Imran said that night, sipping coffee after Maria had gone to bed.

“Yes, many people doubted that, being a single parent, I might not manage this responsibility well,”

Tazeen said — not as a reproach, but the words left her with a sudden twinge of guilt.

“I meant that—” she began, but Imran interrupted her.

“Tazeen, I’m deeply ashamed of my behaviour in the past —

but believe me, today I sincerely beg your forgiveness from the bottom of my heart,”

Imran said earnestly, joining his hands before her. For some reason, tears welled up in Tazeen’s eyes.

“Papa’s last wish was that both his children should remove all bitterness from their hearts. That’s why I’ve completely let go of the past — I remember no one’s unkindness anymore,”

she said softly, looking down at her hands.

“For quite some time, I’d wanted to call you and ask forgiveness myself — but somehow, I never gathered the courage,” Imran replied remorsefully.

“I never harboured enough hatred in my heart, Imran, that I would even wait for your apology,”

Tazeen said, wiping her tears.

“I know — that’s why I consider myself guilty today,” Imran murmured, rubbing his palms together.

“Yes, but you should have asked me once, as a brother, why I took such a major step as separating from Mohsin. Perhaps I could have given you a better answer myself,” Tazeen said, looking into his eyes.

“I’m ashamed — that’s all I can say,” Imran answered after a brief silence.

“Some relationships are better left broken — even if it’s the bond between father and son,” Tazeen said after a pause.

“Today, everyone praises Kashan because I didn’t let him grow up under his father’s shadow. It may sound strange, but it’s the truth.”

“Indeed, your decision was absolutely right, Tazeen,” Imran agreed sincerely.

“Well, we’re leaving in just two days — and I wanted to discuss something important with you,” he said, setting his coffee cup aside.

“About what?” Tazeen asked in surprise.

“About Kashan — and my daughter Aleena,” Imran said, smiling.

✦✦✦✦

Nazli arrived at the library at the appointed time — the one Kashan had told her about. The library stood near her college, a quiet old building scented faintly of paper and polish. Since neither she nor Kashan possessed a valid student card, sitting and studying inside the college library was impossible.

“I hope you didn’t have to wait long,” Nazli said after exchanging polite greetings with Kashan, who was already seated.

“No, I came just ten minutes ago. Perhaps this library is quite far from your home?” Kashan replied kindly.

“Yes, quite far — and the bus got stuck in traffic too,” Nazli said, placing her bag and books on the table. Kashan studied her face attentively. She looked even more beautiful today than she had at their first meeting. They both sat in the open area of the library so they would not disturb others studying inside the hall. Nazli mentioned a few chapters from her books and told Kashan exactly how much help she required. While talking, she only raised her eyes toward him when he addressed her directly.

“I just need to trouble you for these few chapters — I think it won’t take more than two or three days,” Nazli said, seeking his opinion.

“Yes — it depends on how quickly you grasp things,” Kashan replied with a smile.

That first day, neither of them talked about anything other than studies. After three continuous hours of work, Nazli herself stopped.

“That’s enough for today. We’ll cover the remaining portion next time,” she said, flipping through the pages of her book.

“You already have a good understanding of the basics — then why are you so afraid of failing?” Kashan asked, watching her intently.

“Because I’ve failed once before — perhaps that’s why,” Nazli said, her gaze still lowered.

“But falling once doesn’t mean a person should lose faith altogether,” Kashan said gently.

Nazli was startled by his words. “Sorry — what?” she asked, surprised by his use of the word falling.

“I meant that failure makes a person stronger — it gives courage, not weakness; it shouldn’t make one lose faith in oneself,” Kashan said, correcting himself with a faint smile.

“I had never failed before in life. I always studied very well — used to top my class,” Nazli said, bending once more over her book.

“Then how did you fail?” Kashan asked casually — yet unknowingly, he touched a painful nerve.

“Perhaps I couldn’t study properly,” Nazli replied softly.

“But even toppers manage to pass if they study just a little,” Kashan said, smiling.

“I couldn’t even study a little.”

“Any particular reason?” Kashan wanted to reach the root of the matter — but Nazli’s answer stunned him.

“I don’t want to tell you the reason.” Then she stood up, fixing the day for their next meeting in the same library.

“If you’d like, I can drop you,” Kashan said, considering it his moral duty.

“No need — I’ll go myself,” Nazli said, smiling politely.

“You won’t be uncomfortable traveling by bus?”

“Not at all — I’m used to it,” Nazli replied simply, and left.

The strange thing was that Kashan did not find her coldness unpleasant in the least. After that day’s meeting, he began to think that perhaps whatever Professor Najeeb had told him about Nazli might have been a misunderstanding. A traveller lost in the rain need not always have been deceived by someone’s hand. Nazli did not seem like the kind of girl who could be fooled so easily. Kashan’s mind was filled with countless thoughts about her. He knew nothing of her life — and when he wished to know, Nazli had flatly refused. Now Kashan waited only for their next meeting. Unlike Kashan, Nazli’s mind retained only those words of his that were related to Physics.

The next time too, before Nazli arrived, Kashan was already waiting at the library. Just like before, Nazli was slightly late.

“I made you wait again — I’m sorry!” Nazli said apologetically.

“No, not at all. I didn’t mind,” Kashan said with his usual warmth.

“My house is quite far from here — even during college days, I sometimes reached late when I used to come by public bus,” Nazli said quickly, opening her books.

“No problem — I don’t mind at all. Maybe I just came too early — you’re actually on time,” Kashan said, trying to ease her embarrassment.

“No, I’m half an hour late. Didn’t I tell you I’d come at eleven?” Nazli reminded him.

“I only arrived five minutes earlier,” Kashan said — lying with a faint grin.

“All right then,” Nazli said, feeling somewhat relieved.

Just like the first day, her entire focus remained on her studies, her eyes fixed on the book. Meanwhile, Kashan was observing every feature of her face — as though painting her portrait upon an invisible canvas. No artist could have looked at a face with such intensity while painting as Kashan did while teaching Nazli. But the fault lay less with Kashan, and more with Nazli herself — she was simply that beautiful.

“I think we’ve completed these two chapters as well today,” Nazli said at last, after three hours of continuous study and a brief coffee break. To Kashan, it felt as if only a few moments had passed since she had arrived.

“Looks like you won’t need to trouble yourself with me any longer,” Nazli said, placing her pen on the table for the first time in three hours.

“What do you mean?” Kashan asked, though he already understood.

“I mean, I only had difficulty with these chapters — you’ve helped me with them. Thank you,” Nazli said with a smile, closing her books.

“Nazli, may I say something — you won’t mind?” Kashan said impulsively.

“Yes, go ahead?” Nazli looked up briefly, then resumed gathering her books.

“Has anyone ever told you… how beautiful you are?” Kashan said, unable to stop himself, gazing at her face.

Nazli’s swiftly moving hands froze in place. She stared at him in stunned silence.

At the same time, another voice echoed faintly in her ears — a voice she had not heard in years.

“You’re very beautiful.” It was Zain’s voice.

That moment from long ago — Zain stopping Nazli on the road during their first meeting and blurting out that same compliment — came flooding back unbidden.

“You’re very beautiful.”

It was the same deceptive sentence that had changed her life when she first heard it from Zain. Once, those words had sounded to her like the most beautiful in the world — but now, if there was one sentence she despised, it was this one. It was Kashan’s misfortune that he had chosen to compliment her beauty at a time in her life when such words repulsed her deeply. But Kashan had not meant merely to praise her beauty — he had wanted to tell her that he had fallen in love with her. Yet, seeing the colour drain from Nazli’s face, he was left speechless — unable to say another word. Nazli did not stay a second longer.

Without responding, she quietly rose and left. Kashan stood frozen, watching her walk away.

✦✦✦✦

Nazli washed her face and hands in the sink fixed in the veranda. She splashed the last handful of water upon her already wet face and then stood straight. Her damp reflection appeared in the mirror above the sink. For a few moments, she kept looking at the pearl-like droplets shining upon her fair complexion, then quickly turned her gaze away and wiped her face with a towel.

“You’re back now, right? Then please help me prepare for my test.” Suddenly, her younger brother Ameen appeared out of nowhere.

“For now I have to study myself — you prepare for your test on your own,”

Nazli said, moving forward. But Ameen was not one to leave her in peace; he followed her into her room.

Ameen was in seventh grade, yet from his height and build, he looked like a ninth-grader. Nazli had always helped her younger siblings with their studies, but Sharmeen no longer needed her assistance — she studied on her own now.

“Last time I failed math because of you — you didn’t teach me!”

“Then fail again this time,” Nazli said carelessly.

“You failed once too, didn’t you? You must know how bad it feels to fail,” Ameen said innocently. “By the way, how did you fail? None of us have understood that till today.”

What made Ameen suddenly ask such a question, even he did not know.

“I’m tired of answering that question!

As if I didn’t fail but died — and everyone’s shocked, wondering how I died,” Nazli replied in irritation.

“And has anyone else asked you?” Ameen’s surprise continued.

Nazli looked at him silently for a few moments, then spoke calmly:

“Let me rest now — I’ll teach you in the evening. Go away.”

She said this, then picked up her books and placed them on the writing table. Ameen left the room.

Nazli sat for a while, thinking about everything that had happened during the day, then abandoned that chain of thoughts and walked toward Javaid's room.

"How are you feeling now, Baba?"

Nazli asked after greeting him.

Roshan Ara was sitting nearby, busy sewing something on her machine.

"You haven't eaten yet?"

Roshan Ara turned around and asked, looking at her.

"I will, in a little while. Did your fever go down?" Nazli asked, holding Javaid's wrist.

"It's gone, but still your mother won't let me go to the shop," Javaid said. He now looked somewhat better.

For the past few days, illness had overcome him, and Amir's new revelation had frightened him inwardly.

"Then don't go for now — brother Jameel and Amir Bhai are there at the shop,"

Nazli said sympathetically.

"When does Amir ever go there? Jameel is managing everything alone," Javaid replied.

"His days and nights are all spent serving his father-in-law," Roshan Ara muttered, placing her hand on the sewing machine's motor. The machine's humming filled the room.

"Call Amir Bhai and tell him that you're unwell and he should look after the shop," Nazli said, glancing toward Javaid.

"I'm perfectly fine now — I'll go to the shop myself from tomorrow," Javaid said — and then a fit of coughing caught him.

Amir's recent behaviour and a week of illness had already made him look old. His once radiant white face had grown pale. Nazli looked at him attentively, deep in thought.

"Why do you worry so much, Baba? Have faith in Allah — Amir Bhai will pay off the bank loan."

Even without him telling her, Nazli had understood the real cause of his anxiety and illness.

“I just keep fearing day and night that Amir might land us in some new trouble,” Roshan Ara said, worn out from worry.

“Allah forbid, Ammi — nothing like that will happen,” Nazli said quickly, trying to calm them both. But in her heart, she knew that Amir had always disappointed them — in every matter.

The next morning, Javaid rose quietly from his bed and prepared to go to the shop again.
There was still no trace of Amir.

Even through the entire week of Javaid’s illness, Amir had not come once to check on the shop — and this, Javaid had learned from Jameel. Now he was certain that Amir would never return. Yet even in this certainty, there was no bitterness in his heart. He still found contentment in Amir’s happiness.

Amir was his firstborn — the light of his eyes. When he had come into the world, Javaid’s joy had known no bounds. He had distributed sweets throughout the hospital with his own hands, offering them to doctors, nurses, and attendants alike. That was twenty-four years ago, when his furniture shop had been thriving — a business he had inherited and taken charge of at a remarkably young age. Unlike Amir, he had assumed responsibility early, sending his own father home to rest. Javaid’s father never grew tired of blessing him. For as long as he lived, he raised his trembling hands in prayer for his son: “May God bless you with a child as pious and dutiful as yourself.”

In the final years of his life, after paralysis had confined him to bed, it was Javaid who attended to him with unwavering devotion. Each morning before leaving for work, he would bathe and dress his father, and upon returning home at the time of Zuhr, would again look in on him. Roshan Ara was newly married then, and witnessing Javaid’s gentle care, she too tended to her father-in-law with affection and respect. When Amir was born, Javaid became convinced that his father’s prayers had been answered.

“What a beautiful child!” That was the single phrase echoing throughout the hospital that day.

Javaid had ordered the finest sweets from across the city, and with his own hands, distributed them to everyone — from doctors to the cleaning staff. Only a few months after Amir’s birth, Javaid’s father passed away. Javaid, along with his wife and newborn child, settled permanently in his father’s house. He raised Amir like the apple of his eye. He admitted him into the best school he could afford and fulfilled

every desire before it was even voiced. But when Amir turned seven, misfortune crept into Javaid's life. The business that had once flourished began to waver. The shop still ran, but no longer yielded the profits it once had. As years passed, the decline deepened. Many furniture merchants nearby had shifted their shops to better areas of the city, but Javaid could not bear the expense of relocation. Amir's childhood, once full of abundance, soon became a blend of comfort and constraint — days of indulgence followed by nights of worry. When Amir completed his matriculation, he began accompanying his father to the shop — not because anyone had asked him to, but because it seemed an easy escape from the burden of studies. Yet Amir's presence brought little help to Javaid. At Roshan Ara's insistence, he somehow managed to scrape through his intermediate exams, and then bid farewell to education altogether.

"I wasn't much of a student either, Roshan Ara," Javaid had once said, trying to console his wife. "Who knows — perhaps Amir will work so hard in the shop that the business will prosper again someday." Today, that same sentence echoed in his mind — but with the ache of irony. He sat in his shop, gazing at the old wooden counters that once bustled with customers. At fifty-five, for the first time in his life, he felt truly weary. Amir had indeed taken the business "from one place to another" — but in the worst way imaginable. The shop was now mortgaged to the bank, and Amir himself had vanished into his father-in-law's factory. With trembling fingers, Javaid dialled Amir's number. The phone kept ringing. Amir did not answer.

Javaid exhaled slowly and set the phone aside, his heart heavy with disappointment.

✦✦✦

Anita burst into the room, panting and trembling. Amir was snoring. She rushed to him and began shaking him.

"Amir, wake up! There's a call from Baba — from the factory!" she said, shaking his shoulder.

"What's the problem now?" Amir asked, forcing his eyes half open before shutting them again, then turned over and tried to sleep.

"Baba called — he sounded furious. He said, tell Amir to come to the factory immediately."

There was no reply from Amir for a while. Then the phone in Anita's hand began ringing again.

“Amir, for God’s sake, wake up now! Look, Baba is calling again!”

The shrill, jarring ringtone finally forced Amir to sit up.

“What’s the matter now?” he asked, frowning.

“Instead of asking me, why don’t you ask Baba? He’s asking why you’re not coming to the factory!”

“Didn’t you tell him I’m sick?” Amir snapped.

“I did — but instead he scolded me!” Anita replied sharply.

“Why?” Amir asked in surprise.

“Because he’s found out you’re not sick at all — you went off to Murree with your friends!” Anita said irritably.

“I went with my own money — not your father’s,” Amir retorted angrily.

“I never said you didn’t. But Baba took you into the factory to work, remember?” Anita shot back.

“I invested money there — I’m not a worker,” Amir said, getting up from the bed.

“Look, Amir, instead of arguing with me, talk to Baba yourself. I didn’t tell him to keep calling you,” Anita said firmly and left the room.

Amir stood there for a while, staring at the endless missed calls on his phone. He shook his head, tossed the phone aside, and began getting ready for the factory. Among all those missed calls were two or three from Javaid — which Amir never even noticed.

When he reached the factory, a storm awaited him. Ikram was in a rage, and the accountant was present too.

“Congratulations, Amir! This was our third shipment — and it’s been ruined because of your stupidity!” Ikram exploded the moment he saw him.

“How because of me?”

“Because it was on your recommendation that I hired your friend as Production In-charge! So it was your responsibility to personally ensure the quality!” Ikram’s eyes blazed with fury.

“You know I supervised the quality checking myself!”

“Supervised? My foot! The entire shipment’s been rejected — it’s lying abandoned at Dubai port!” Ikram shouted, slamming a bundle of papers onto the table.

Amir now began to grasp the seriousness of the situation. “Uncle, you know I fell ill — the goods were packed while I was away,” he said, trying to sound helpless.

“Do I look like an idiot to you? You think I don’t know where you went ‘sick’?” Ikram roared.

Amir had no answer.

“Even if I did go somewhere, I spent my own money, and—” Amir’s sentence trailed off.

“Shut your mouth! If you weren’t my son-in-law, I’d have had you thrown behind bars for lying and causing a loss of millions! You have no idea who you’re dealing with!” Ikram thundered.

“Uncle, don’t forget — I’ve invested lakhs in your business too!” Amir’s voice rose.

“And I won’t return you a single penny of it! Go — do whatever you want!” Ikram snapped his fingers and sank back into his chair.

“What do you mean by that?” Amir stared at him, wide-eyed.

“Can’t you understand plain words? From production to quality, to shipment — everything was your responsibility! You gave me a loss of crores for your forty lakhs!” Ikram’s voice grew so loud that his business partner outside came rushing in.

Ilyas entered, casting a look of pure contempt at Amir.

“And that friend of yours — that useless fellow — I’ve thrown him out of the factory today! And now you can leave too!” Ikram dealt him another blow.

“What do you mean? My money is invested in your machinery!” Amir protested desperately, like a drowning man clutching at straws.

“Then prove it — and take it back! For now, on paper, the machinery belongs to the company,” came the cold, unexpected voice — from Ilyas.

His disdainful tone made Amir tremble.

“This matter doesn’t concern you, Mr. Ilyas — it’s between me and my father-in-law.”

“In business, there are no fathers-in-law and sons-in-law — understand?” Ilyas replied loudly.

“You invested money of your own will. In return, we gave you profits — and for five months, a handsome salary, a house in a good area, whose rent the company paid, a motorcycle, and even the bank loan interest the company covered!” Ilyas listed every favour, staring directly into Amir’s eyes.

“I’m not solely responsible for your losses!” Amir said helplessly.

“Because of you we dismissed our most trusted production manager, and gave you full charge — to supervise production, packaging, quality, and shipment yourself!” Ikram’s furious tone still shook the room’s walls.

“I got you good profits on two previous orders!” Amir shouted back.

“And losses on four others that broke our back! Two clients cancelled because of your delay — and the goods were refused at Dubai port. The other two had quality issues!” Ilyas jumped back into the fray. Amir no longer knew how to respond to this barrage of accusations. There was no doubt that Ikram and Ilyas had suffered major losses, but equally, not all the fault was his. They were deliberately dumping all blame on Amir to avoid repaying him his investment with heavy interest. Besides, they were already fed up with his incompetence. Taking advantage of being the son-in-law, Amir had once coerced the accountant and withdrawn lakhs from the company account without Ikram’s knowledge. When Ilyas found out, he took the complaint to Ikram. That had been the first time Ikram lost his temper at Amir. Later, a few more minor acts of manipulation came to light. Amir had brought some suppliers he knew into the factory, and once or twice, he even intercepted their payment cheques. When those suppliers came shouting for payment and refused to continue working, Ikram’s trust in Amir was destroyed forever.

“I married Anita to a complete fool!” Ikram blurted that evening to his wife.

Anita, who had come to visit her father and stepmother, covered her mouth in shock.

“Baba, what happened?” she asked, eyes wide.

“At your constant insistence, I took Amir from his shop into my business — and today I’ve lost crores, only because of him!” Ikram said bitterly, rolling up his sleeves for dinner.

“Well, thank God you didn’t let your son-in-law stay upstairs — otherwise even this house would’ve gone,” Fareeda interjected, as usual.

Anita rolled her eyes at her stepmother, then turned back to her father.

“But Baba, what exactly happened?”

“Ask Amir yourself — he’ll tell you. He’s humiliated me before Ilyas! Every other day he creates new problems at the factory. I’m tired of covering for him,” Ikram said, shaking his head.

“But Baba, Amir even mortgaged his shop in the bank for you people,” Anita said timidly.

“That’s exactly what ruined me! I rewarded him handsomely, gave him full responsibility — and he cut off my nose in return! Now Ilyas can’t stand him.”

“Ilyas has clearly told me — either remove your son-in-law from the business or I’ll end our partnership.”

“Baba, what are you saying?” Anita stared at him in disbelief.

“What else can I do? You can see the situation yourself. Like a child, he steals money, avoids work, and has filled my factory with his friends! I’m sick of him — and now this massive loss.”

“But Baba, it’s not entirely Amir’s fault!” Anita began sweating with anxiety.

“Even after hearing all this, you still can’t see your husband’s mistake?” Fareeda said, placing the jug of water on the dining table. She was busy setting the food before Ikram.

“Baba, what have you decided about Amir?” Anita asked nervously.

“I can’t trust him anymore. I’ve been paying him a fat salary for nothing, and covering all his other expenses too,” Ikram said, looking at her gravely.

“Then what will Amir do now? The rent of our flat is already so high — and there are other expenses too,” Anita said fearfully, sensing danger in his tone.

“I can make him in-charge of my warehouse — but he’ll have no role in my business anymore,” Ikram said, as though issuing a decree.

“And what about the bank loan Amir took by mortgaging his shop?” Anita asked, completely lost.

“How should I know? Let him figure it out himself. Right now, we’ve suffered such a loss that I can’t even think of paying those instalments.”

“Please, Baba, don’t do this! That shop is the only source of income for Amir’s family. If the loan isn’t paid, the bank will take the shop!” Anita pleaded — she knew well the financial strain in Amir’s home.

“You can see the situation yourself. I’ll try to manage things, but for now, it’s impossible for me to repay that loan,” Ikram said calmly, chewing his food.

At these words, the ground seemed to slip from beneath Anita’s feet. Fareeda glanced at her from the corner of her eye, muttering inwardly.

She cared neither for Anita nor for Amir’s mortgaged shop — her only concern was that Anita and Amir might someday move into the upper floor of their house. While Ikram lived, she couldn’t stop him from helping his daughter — but she dreaded it. Anita, unaware of these thoughts, was sinking deeper into despair over her and Amir’s future. After failures in both her father’s shop and her father-in-law’s factory, Amir had brought nothing but greater hardship for his wife and their unborn child.

✦✦✦✦

Since his last meeting with Nazli, Kashan had been restless and uneasy. He had spoken to her with all propriety and courtesy, but that she would leave without a word of reply, angry over something so small, was beyond his understanding. The change that came over Nazli’s face in that moment had left Kashan ashamed for a few seconds.

“Kashan, you haven’t slept yet?” Tazeen suddenly entered the room, breaking his chain of thought.

“No — I couldn’t sleep,” Kashan said, putting aside the book he was holding.

“My office shifting is finally complete today,” Tazeen said, sitting down on the sofa nearby with a cup of coffee in her hand.

“You wanted to do the shifting long ago,” Kashan recalled.

“Yes — first Papa passed away, and then with Imran and Maria’s arrival, it got delayed,” Tazeen said, taking a sip.

“I see,” Kashan said simply.

“Kashan, I needed to talk to you about something,” Tazeen said, looking intently at him.

He gave no reply.

“Kashan?” she repeated after a few seconds.

“Yes?” he asked in an even tone.

“I want to talk to you about something.”

“Then go ahead,”

Kashan said, looking at her.

“But you seem lost in some other thought — is everything all right?” She easily sensed his distraction.

“Yes, all fine. What is it?” Kashan said, avoiding her concern.

“This time, Imran and Maria couldn’t stop praising you,” Tazeen began.

“Really? That’s surprising,” Kashan said with a faint, sarcastic smile.

“Why? What’s so surprising about that?” She caught his tone but pretended not to.

“When a relative never praises you their whole life and then suddenly starts showering praise, of course it’s surprising,” Kashan said lightly.

“Imran feels remorse for his past behaviour — he even apologized to me,” Tazeen said, ignoring his comment.

“Oh.”

Kashan didn’t find it worth pursuing. Tazeen stared at the coffee left in her cup for a while, then spoke again.

“Imran showed me pictures of his daughter Aleena.”

“I’ve seen them too — on Maria Auntie’s iPad. Not just Aleena’s, but Wasif’s and Adeel’s as well,” Kashan said with a smile.

“Aleena is very beautiful, isn’t she?” Tazeen said, smiling.

“Yes, she is beautiful,” Kashan agreed.

“Two days before leaving, Imran talked to me for a long time —and then, with great fondness, he expressed his wish that you and Aleena should be married.” Finally, Tazeen said what she had been building up to. Kashan suddenly burst into laughter. Tazeen was startled.

“What’s so funny?” she asked in surprise.

“I’m laughing because Uncle Imran seems to think everyone except himself is a fool,” Kashan said, looking at her strangely.

“What do you mean?” Tazeen was confused.

“I mean that for seventeen years, he never saw a single quality in his nephew — because at that time his sister and her son were helpless and disgraced, and perhaps a burden to him. So he turned his face away, cleansing himself of all ties.”

“He’s ashamed of that, Kashan,” Tazeen said defensively.

“Ashamed? He told you that in two lines — and you believed it?”

“What else could he do?

Words are all one has to express regret,” she replied seriously.

“And right after expressing that regret, he put forth this marriage proposal?” Kashan asked gently, trying to show her what she hadn’t seen — or had ignored.

“If you’re referring to his proposal about Aleena, then I see nothing wrong in it. That’s how families form ties,” Tazeen replied calmly.

“Ties, yes — but not by deceiving one another,” Kashan said, shaking his head.

“What do you mean, Kashan? I don’t understand,” Tazeen asked, perplexed.

“Do you know why Uncle Imran wants to marry Aleena to me?”

“Obviously because he and Maria like you — they think you’re a good match for their daughter.”

“Exactly — because anyone else, after knowing everything about Aleena, would think twice before marrying her,” Kashan said in a cutting tone.

“What do you mean? Speak clearly — what are you saying?” Tazeen still couldn’t follow.

“Mom, the law college in New York where Aleena studies — my close friend studies there too. A year ago, I recognized Aleena in one of his college photos.” Kashan paused briefly.

“So?” Tazeen urged.

“After a few casual questions, I confirmed I’d recognized her correctly. When I told my friend she was my cousin, he, during conversation, told me something more.”

“Like what?” Her curiosity peaked.

“Like — that Aleena had a love marriage, and got divorced three months later,” Kashan said, ending her suspense.

“Are you sure?” Tazeen asked in disbelief.

“Absolutely. And her ex-husband still studies at the same college. Despite her parents’ strong opposition, she went ahead with it,” Kashan said firmly.

Tazeen was speechless for a few moments.

“But why didn’t you tell me earlier?” she asked finally.

“Because Aleena’s personal life — or Uncle Imran’s — was never important to me,” Kashan said indifferently.

“Still, you can’t outright refuse a family proposal, my son.”

“Of course I can — I’ve only ever shown as much interest in their lives as Uncle Imran ever showed in ours,” Kashan replied seriously.

“Strange. Why didn’t Imran tell me all this?” Tazeen said after a pause.

“You think he would have told you? The same man who once expressed shock and disgust

when you got divorced?” Kashan’s memory of Imran’s old attitude was clear.

Tazeen said nothing. She was deep in thought.

“You must understand — he still sees us as inferior and lowly. That’s why, hiding the truth, he now wants to tie his divorced daughter to your unmarried son” Kashan said bluntly, not caring if it hurt her.

“Imran has disappointed me once again — such selfishness,” Tazeen said sorrowfully.

“Those who’ve disappointed once can always do it again. Changing circumstances reveal one’s true nature,” Kashan said, staring into space.

“It’s good I didn’t give Imran any final answer. I only said I’d talk to you first,” Tazeen said wearily. “Aleena’s divorce is no sin — but Imran should’ve trusted me,” she added, and rose to leave the room.

“By the way, Mom, why this sudden concern for my marriage?” Kashan asked, smiling as she turned.

“Because I am going to get you married,” she replied.

“And what if I say I’ll soon introduce you to a very beautiful girl?” Kashan said, smiling playfully.

Tazeen’s eyes widened.

“Oh my God, Kashan! Who is this very beautiful girl?”

“Nazli,” Kashan said involuntarily.

✦✦✦✦

Nazli had not seen Kashan for more than two weeks, yet during all that time, not once had he crossed her mind. The reason was by no means that Kashan lacked the power to impress anyone — in fact, Nazli had never met a young man more refined, more pleasant than him. His grace made him the center of attention wherever he went. But Nazli, indifferent to both his outer and inner charm, kept her attention fixed only upon her studies. She had always been that way — only in recognizing Zain had she deceived herself. After that heartbreak, the shattering within her had buried many of her feelings somewhere deep inside. Kashan’s spontaneous praise had, for a moment, reopened the wounds left by that deceiver, wounds she no longer wished to touch. Most of her time was now spent either studying herself or teaching Ameen. Beyond that, she had also become busy with household work. And over all other worries, Javaid’s rapidly declining health had made her deeply anxious. For some days, Nazli had been noticing that Javaid had grown quieter, more serious than before. One day, one of Javaid’s workers told him that the condition of Amir’s father-in-law’s factory was not good.

“How do you know that?” Javaid asked anxiously.

“Didn’t I tell you, sir, that my cousin also works there? He’s the one who told me,” Saleem replied, wiping the sweat from his brow with his sleeve.

“But what exactly happened?” Before Javaid could ask, Jameel spoke up. Jameel had worked in Javaid’s shop since the age of fourteen; it had now been eighteen years.

“All I heard,” Saleem said, “is that they haven’t paid their workers for two months.”

“What could be the reason?” Javaid asked in alarm.

“Maybe there was some defect in their goods, and the buyer refused to take delivery. They’ve suffered heavy losses, sir. You should ask your son; he’ll tell you the truth.” Saleem spoke while polishing a piece of furniture on the table. “Brother Amir doesn’t even answer our calls these days — we’ve phoned him so many times,” Jameel replied in frustration.

Javaid fell completely silent after hearing all this. He began dialling Amir's number again. He knew that if Amir failed to repay the bank loan due to losses in business, they would lose their shop altogether.

"Hello... hello, Amir!"

Javaid spoke hurriedly as, to his surprise, the call was answered. Amir, at that moment, was leaning against a pillar in the factory, watching the workers toil. His eyes were already brimming with tears even before Javaid's call came through.

"Baba..."

Amir rubbed the corners of his eyes with his fingers.

"How are you, son? You haven't come to the shop for days, and you haven't been answering the phone either," Javaid blurted out all at once — his anxiety obvious in his tone.

"I've just been around here," Amir said, struggling to control his choked voice.

"You sound worried to me. Is everything running fine at the factory?" Javaid refrained from sharing the information he had heard.

"Yes, everything's fine... just keep praying for me, Baba," Amir replied in a sunken voice.

"I pray for you in every prayer, my son. You haven't come home for so long — bring Anita and come; we all wait for you every day."

"I'll come soon, Baba," Amir said softly.

Even without Amir saying much, Javaid could sense from his tone that he was troubled.

Ikram had pinned the blame on Amir and excluded him from many affairs, then humiliated him further by assigning him to warehouse duty. Ikram himself was displeased with Amir, and his business partner Ilyas kept recounting Amir's carelessness and holding him responsible for everything. This month's loan instalment to the bank had not been paid. Still, Amir had not lost hope. Fights with Anita had become an everyday affair. He constantly cursed Ikram, and it was not easy for Anita to hear her father insulted. When the shortage of money began, Amir turned toward his parents' house.

“But Amir, what will happen now? I’m growing anxious just thinking about it.” Amir was sitting before Javaid and Roshan Ara, while Anita stood in the kitchen talking to Nazli.

“Baba, for now there’s been a loss in business, but that doesn’t mean there’ll be one again,” Amir said quietly.

“But you yourself told me you haven’t paid this month’s instalment yet,” Javaid said, deeply worried, while Roshan Ara sat silently staring at him.

“The bank will keep adding interest upon interest; the amount will double, even quadruple!”

“Nothing like that will happen — just keep praying,” Amir replied.

“Praying won’t end your uselessness!” Roshan Ara snapped.

“This isn’t uselessness — it’s my fate,” Amir said helplessly.

“You made your own fate, Amir! You never cared for studies, nor did you truly help Javaid at the shop. Instead, you went and sat at your father-in-law’s feet!” Roshan Ara glared at him as she spoke.

“Ammi, you don’t know anything.”

“You ever think of your sisters? How their marriages will be arranged? You’ve even gambled away the family’s only source of income!” The lava that had been simmering inside Roshan Ara for weeks erupted all at once.

“Leave it, Roshan Ara. Amir has come home after so many days — don’t hurt his heart,” Javaid said, as always stepping in to end the growing argument.

Of all his children, Javaid’s greatest attachment was to his eldest son, Amir — perhaps that was why Roshan Ara had always withheld a little of her love for him, knowing that Amir already possessed an ocean of affection in his father’s heart. And when her small river of love flowed into that ocean, its loss of a few buckets made no difference to Amir at all.

✦✦✦✦

Nazli, because of her brother and sister-in-law’s visit, was busy preparing tea for everyone; Anita was helping her.

“I can understand, Bhabhi. Amir Bhai doesn’t think when he’s angry— he just says whatever comes to his mouth,” Nazli said while arranging cups neatly on the tray.

“Yes, exactly! What dealings my father and he have— how would I know? And what fault is mine in it?” Anita replied helplessly.

“He keeps taunting me that because of me he left home— because I couldn’t get along with my in-laws.”

“Oh no, Bhabhi, Ammi was upset at first because Amir Bhai married by choice, but gradually everything settled down— you know that.”

Nazli poured tea into the cups as she spoke, though deep down she knew she wasn’t telling the truth. Roshan Ara had disliked Anita from the very first day— and still did.

“That’s what I say too. I didn’t come to this house by force— it was Amir’s insistence to marry me,” Anita said, shaking her head bitterly.

Suddenly Ameen entered the kitchen, threw Nazli’s mobile phone down in front of her, and walked out without a word.

“What rudeness is this, Ameen?” Nazli exclaimed, startled by his behaviour.

“Your phone kept ringing again and again, so I brought it,” Ameen said over his shoulder, disappearing as quickly as he had come. Nazli couldn’t question further, but she wondered who could be calling her at this hour. She glanced at the phone once, then went back to her work. Anita placed the plates of kebabs and biscuits onto the tea tray.

“Here, give me this tray; I’ll take it,” Anita said, lifting it from before Nazli and leaving the kitchen.

Nazli picked up her phone— two missed calls, both from Kashan. Ignoring them, she headed to her room. She never involved herself in the arguments between Roshan Ara and Amir. Amir was offering justifications for his past failures, while Roshan Ara was showering him with titles of a useless and heartless brother. Javaid kept telling her to be quiet. Anita, who had brought in the tea, sat there like an uninvited guest, becoming the target of Roshan Ara’s reproaches. Nazli saw no purpose in being there, so she quietly withdrew to her own room. Kashan calling again after twenty days was a surprise to her, for she had thought his call would come the very next day after their last meeting. As Nazli was casually thinking about all this, the phone rang once more. She looked—again it was Kashan. She stared at the screen for a few moments, then lifted the phone to her ear.

“Hello,” Nazli said, her tone curt.

“Nazli, thank God you answered! How are you?” Kashan was walking in his garden; he grew emotional hearing her voice again.

“I’m fine,” Nazli replied briefly, as if to end the conversation there.

“You left so suddenly that day. I felt maybe you didn’t like what I said,” Kashan finally voiced what he had wanted to say for days.

“You’re right. I didn’t like what you said,” Nazli replied bluntly.

“But I didn’t say anything wrong— I only said you’re beautiful.” Kashan tried to explain.

“Yes, but that compliment didn’t sound right coming from you,” Nazli maintained her reserve.

Kashan fell silent. Sometimes, a few seconds of silence contain all the pain in the world.

“Nazli, if I hurt you with my words, please forgive me,” Kashan said softly.

“You didn’t hurt me, and there’s no need to apologize. Thank you for helping me with my studies,” Nazli said seriously.

“Can’t we be friends?” Kashan asked, ignoring her indifference.

Hearing this, Nazli instantly remembered the day Zain had asked for friendship in the same way— and her mind turned upside down. A storm began to rage inside her; someone had reopened an old wound.

“You people only have these lines to trap girls— ‘let’s be friends,’ ‘you look nice,’ and so on! Do you think I’ll lose myself in your thoughts after hearing such words? Then, after a week of friendship, you’ll confess love, right? You’ll fool me until you get bored!” Nazli’s hands trembled with anger.

Kashan stood speechless.

“And then, you’ll start promising marriage, heaping up the skies with flattery— until your parents pull your ears, and you’ll say, ‘I didn’t mean it that way!’”

Nazli paused briefly to wet her dry lips, and then Kashan’s quiet voice came through.

“But I never said any of that.”

“Not yet, but you would have! I just don’t understand why you men feel the urge to befriend any girl you see once!”

Kashan was dumbstruck.

“See her once, maybe twice— and then start chanting ‘let’s be friends!’ day and night!” Nazli’s tone burned like fire.

“Once? But we’ve met several times,” Kashan said, still patient.

“Look, Mister, you taught me, you helped me—thank you for that. If you wish, I’ll even pay your tuition fee. But please, from today, don’t ever expect friendship from me. And don’t call me again about it.”

Saying this, Nazli ended the call immediately. She felt streams of tears running down her cheeks, her breath quickening uncontrollably. She flung the phone onto the bed in disgust, turned to leave— and froze in shock. Anita was standing there, calm and still, as if she had been there for quite a while. Nazli stared at her, unable to think what to say. Her cheeks still glistened with tears.

“Who was that boy, Nazli?” Anita asked in surprise, before Nazli could utter a word.

Nazli, instead of replying, broke down and began to weep helplessly. Anita quickly stepped forward to console her.

“What happened, Nazli?” She didn’t know how to make her stop crying. Nazli sobbed as if she had long been waiting for the chance to cry her heart out. Despite every effort, she had never truly been able to forget Zain— not for even a single day. Where once her mind echoed with the drums of love, now the pain of betrayal secretly pricked her soul. She had simply stopped speaking of it— even to her confidante, Sarah. And now, after so many months, Kashan had pricked that same old blister again.

“I’m proud of you, Nazli— whoever that boy was, you certainly set him straight,” Anita said, sitting beside her, trying to calm her.

“Yes, but this wisdom came too late— after I had lost respect even in my own eyes,”

Nazli said, wiping her tears.

“What do you mean?” Anita asked, puzzled.

“Bhabhi, not everyone is like Amir Bhai— who could fight the whole world to protect love.

You’re very lucky.” Nazli looked at her through tear-stained lashes.

“Yes, Amir did what he said he would,” Anita agreed softly.

“Believing everything people say is our greatest foolishness— it ruins lives,” Nazli said, her voice trembling again.

“What happened that makes you talk like this?” Anita asked, astonished.

“There was someone— who fooled me for months, and then one day simply forgot me,” Nazli said in a tone that seemed emptied of life. Anita’s astonishment reached the skies.

“Who was he?” she asked gently. Nazli, thinking for a moment, seemed to take Anita as her confessor— perhaps she had been waiting months for someone who would simply listen, without judging, without interrupting. Anita too sensed she was like a patient, so she stayed silent, listening. Nazli told her everything, from beginning to end. Neither she nor Anita realized that someone else had quietly entered the room and was hearing them. That third person hadn’t heard everything, but the last few lines— enough to set his blood on fire.

“But I kept believing his every word, never realizing he was only amusing himself with me,” Nazli continued.

“That was your mistake, Nazli— you should have understood the boy’s intent first,” Anita said, in a calm, consoling tone.

“But I loved him! That day when he took me alone to his flat, even then I didn’t understand what his intention was— but thank God, his mother arrived right then and saw us alone there, so…” Nazli kept speaking— then saw Anita suddenly rise. Anita’s frightened eyes were fixed on Amir standing at the door. Nazli followed her gaze— and froze.

“A… Amir… shall we go home?” Anita tried to act as if Amir had just arrived, though she knew he’d been standing there silently for some time. Amir’s eyes were locked on Nazli. Nazli, now terrified like Anita, saw the fury blazing in them.

“What stories are you telling, Nazli?” Amir said, stepping toward her— and slapped her across the face.

“Shameless girl! We send you to study, and you do this!”

His voice roared through the house. He moved toward her again, but Anita stepped between them.

“Amir, what’s wrong with you? Have you gone mad?” Anita screamed, trying to stop him, but he shoved her aside and struck Nazli again. Nazli held her cheek, staring at him in disbelief. Roshan Ara entered— and froze at the sight.

“What is happening here?” she gasped.

Nazli was sobbing bitterly, Amir’s eyes still blazing. Anita gathered courage again, trying to push him away.

“I’ll kill her— I’ll kill her!” Amir roared again.

“What’s happened? What has Nazli done?” Roshan Ara cried, rushing to hold her daughter.

Amir pushed Anita aside once more and advanced toward Nazli but stopped when Roshan Ara stepped in front of her. Just then, Sharmeen and Ameen ran in, alarmed by the shouting.

“Don’t you dare touch my daughter—stay back!” Roshan Ara raised her hand to stop him.

At that moment, Javaid also entered.

“What is all this shouting? What’s going on here?” he demanded angrily.

“Ask her, Baba! She’ll tell you her deeds!” Amir glared at Nazli with burning hatred.

“What nonsense are you talking? Have you no shame?” Javaid scolded.

“Ask her, Baba! Why so silent now? Tell them your stories of disgrace!” Amir shouted, throwing away all decency.

“I haven’t done anything wrong, Amir Bhai,” Nazli cried out for the first time amid the uproar.

“Then what were you just telling Anita?” he hissed.

“Ask Bhabhi what I told her!” Nazli shouted back.

“Amir, you’re mistaken— she didn’t do anything like that,” Anita said firmly, standing by her.

“Didn’t she go alone with a boy to a flat?” Amir shot back, glaring.

Nazli answered before Anita could.

“Yes, I went— but that’s all. I made no other mistake.”

“And what more would you have done?” Amir sneered.

“I was in love— just as you loved Anita Bhabhi!” Nazli spoke without guilt or fear.

But such words were unacceptable to anyone there— especially a so-called honour-bound brother and parents who trusted their daughter blindly.

“What are you saying, Nazli?” Roshan Ara’s voice trembled.

“I’m telling the truth— that was my only sin, nothing else,” Nazli said confidently.

Javaid stood staring, stunned.

“Weren’t you ashamed doing all this?” Amir’s hatred burned on.

“Why? If you could love and marry by choice, why can’t I? I wanted to marry too!” Nazli no longer feared anything.

“Be quiet, Nazli! Stop this nonsense!” Roshan Ara couldn’t bear it.

“See, Baba? See your daughter—what she’s done?” Amir turned to Javaid.

“I did nothing wrong, Baba. I swear I’ve always valued your honour above everything. Please believe me.”

Javaid stood speechless. Nazli burst into tears.

“You all see now? And you used to taunt me for not arranging my sisters’ marriages!” Amir tried to justify himself.

“Be silent, Amir, and get out! Enough!” Roshan Ara shouted— his taunts now felt like poison.

“I’d already left this house once— now I’ll go without regret!” Amir stormed out.

Anita too left, weeping, casting one last sorrowful glance at Nazli.

Javaid, though he wished to, could not show sympathy. He just kept looking at Nazli with strange, wounded eyes. Nazli looked back at him, waiting for his reaction.

“Nazli, what have you done? You’ve shown the same shamelessness I always cursed in Amir’s wife!” Roshan Ara moved away, but Nazli heard nothing— saw only the tears shining in Javaid’s eyes. Despite all his effort, the tears spilled over. Then he turned and left the room. Nazli watched him go.

“You’ve disgraced me before Anita, Nazli! How proud I was of my daughters! Is this why we let you study—this?” Roshan Ara said bitterly and walked out.

Sharmeen followed, crying. Only Ameen stayed beside Nazli. Seeing her helpless, he began to cry too— wiping her tears with his small hands, then wrapping his little arms around her and sobbing along with her.

That night, no one in the house slept. Javaid, already weakened by months of worry over Amir, completely collapsed after hearing the truth about Nazli. He kept thinking— had his own children become his test in life?

The next day, after Javaid silently left for the shop, Roshan Ara again began hurling taunts at Nazli.

“Now I understand what you were up to before Sana’s wedding! Pretending to study, locking yourself in your room all day— so this was what you were doing!” Her eyes blazed.

Nazli said nothing.

“That’s why you failed— your mind was busy in these indecencies!” Roshan Ara struck again.

“Ammi, I only know this much— I’ve never done anything that could dishonour you or Baba,” Nazli replied quietly.

“When the proposal for Ahmer came, why were you so terrified? Now I understand that too!” Roshan Ara ignored her words entirely. “You didn’t think of your old father’s honour— he’s been turning on his bed all night, crying!”

Nazli looked up, startled.

“Because of girls like you, parents end up drinking poison,” Roshan Ara said, glaring, then hurried out of the room.

Nazli didn’t know how to prove her innocence. Javaid had never faced such great troubles before. Now, in this age, because of Amir and Nazli, he felt his strength slipping. He had gone utterly silent, speaking to no one. Nazli tried several times to go and talk to him, to tell him that she could never disgrace him— but she couldn’t gather the courage. Javaid now remained sunk in sorrow. The final blow came when a bank notice arrived in Amir’s name.

“Amir, try to understand— this is a legal notice from the bank! If we don’t act, they’ll take our shop!” Javaid’s hands trembled.

For months, Amir hadn’t paid the loan. Despite his constant reassurances, the notice hit Javaid like a thunderbolt. That shop was their only livelihood.

“Baba, nothing will happen, don’t worry.”

“How can I not worry? Worry is killing me, Amir!” Javaid’s voice was filled with pain.

“Everything will be fine— it’s just that a few orders caused losses,” Amir said, as always.

But Javaid no longer believed a word. A hopeless darkness had engulfed him completely.

Roshan Ara kept blaming Nazli and Amir for his condition, but Javaid blamed only himself— believing his blind trust in his children had brought him here. That night, after offering the Isha prayer, he lay down quietly to sleep. Despite Roshan Ara’s insistence, he didn’t eat dinner. Even after the Fajr azan, he didn’t move, still lying as he was. Roshan Ara was puzzled— in all these years, Javaid had never missed the dawn prayer, not even in illness.

“The azan has been called— get up for wudu,” she said, looking at him.

“Not going to the mosque today? Will you pray at home?” she asked again after two minutes. There was no reply. Now she began to worry. She rose from her bed, went close to him in the dim morning light, and looked carefully at his face. She shook him gently— he didn’t open his eyes. Quickly, she took his hand to see if he had fever again— but as she moved to touch his forehead, his hand slipped lifelessly from hers. She covered her mouth in horror. Javaid had been freed from all the worries of life. His soul had left his body.

✦✦✦✦✦✦✦✦✦

Chapter Four — Attaining Life

In life, there are some people whose behaviour becomes so unexpected that one is compelled to wonder what fault one might have committed for the other person to act that way. Something of the same kind happened with Kashan. The bombardment of words from Nazli had been so fierce that he had failed utterly to defend himself. He had never imagined such a tone, such coldness, could come from her. For several days afterward, sadness enveloped him completely. Yet amid that sorrow, he kept asking himself where exactly he had gone wrong. Gradually, he became convinced that the fault lay within himself — that he should never have expressed his feelings with such familiarity. And since he had done so, he should not, like some hopeless lover, have kept calling her after being ignored. Days passed as Kashan went on thinking about these things, blaming himself for everything. He no longer possessed the courage to contact Nazli again. Her wounded, tigress-like demeanour was engraved upon his mind. And yet, even so, the mystery and quiet beauty of her personality continued to draw him. But Kashan had no idea that a single phone call from him would one day bring an earthquake into Nazli's life. Where Kashan had failed to forget Nazli, Nazli too — for many months to come — would fail to forget him.

✦✦✦

Javaid had passed away. At the time of dawn, when Roshan Ara found Javaid lying senseless and unresponsive, she immediately called an ambulance and took him to the hospital, where the doctors confirmed his death. That same evening, after the Maghrib prayer, Javaid was buried.

Amir wept like a child. All the arrangements for the burial were handled by their old employee, Brother Jameel. Amir himself was in no condition to manage anything. Already crushed by his own failures, he was now completely broken by Javaid's sudden death. After the funeral, crying and exhausted, he returned home. As soon as he arrived, neighbours and relatives began to pour in one after another.

"Amir beta, have courage now — you must take care of your home yourself," said Jameel, who had watched Amir grow from a boy into a man, and regarded him as his own child.

"I have nothing left now — Baba is gone too." Tears streamed ceaselessly from Amir's eyes.

"Don't speak such hopeless words, Amir. Your father loved you deeply. Ever since you left him alone at the shop, he began to fall ill and never again found peace. The thought of losing the shop was the final blow." Jameel's words only deepened Amir's sorrow.

No one knew Javaid's affairs better than Jameel. He had been with him for eighteen years — through every rise and fall. He knew the business losses, the disappointments, the misfortunes of the past few years.

"But, son, perhaps it was God's will. My advice is: think of the future now — think of your family. After your father, they need you. You have to arrange your sisters' marriages, run the household. You cannot sit paralysed by grief." Jameel placed a hand on Amir's shoulder, trying to console him.

At the mention of his sisters, Amir's thoughts instantly turned toward Nazli.

"It's not I who am responsible for Baba's untimely death — it's Nazli. She killed him." Amir thought this to himself, shaking his head in hatred.

Jameel continued speaking to him for a long time. Then, as the relatives gradually departed, he too went home. Amir sat alone in a corner of the courtyard till midnight, weeping. Javaid had indeed loved Amir selflessly. Among all his children, he loved Amir the most. Anita told Amir several times to come inside and rest, but he refused; he wanted to sit alone and mourn. Roshan Ara had fallen completely silent. She spoke to no one — her state seemed almost one of shock. Their elder daughter, Sana, had flown in from Qatar as soon as she heard of her father's death. Through constant phone contact, she had been aware of everything that had been happening at home. It was she who had been helping Roshan Ara financially. Now, after Javaid's passing, Sana immediately gave some money to her mother. For the time being, Jameel was managing the shop. Amir and Anita had not returned to their own home since the day of the funeral.

Nazli's condition was no different from Roshan Ara's. She had become utterly quiet, spending her days staring at the walls. She grieved deeply over her father's death — but even more over having fallen from his grace. It gave her no peace that she had never been able to explain herself to him. Everything had happened so suddenly, so swiftly, that no one had found a chance to recover — and now Javaid was gone.

"Nazli, how long will you sit silent like this, shedding tears?" Sana said softly.

Nazli gave no answer.

"Your state is like this, and Ammi's is the same. It frightens me to see you both. Don't you think I'm grieving for Baba? But I'm trying to stay strong."

Sana spoke as she picked up a few dishes from the room. Nazli, as always, replied only with silence — her eyes wet and glistening. Seeing her tears, Sana stopped, set the things down on the table, and sat beside her.

“How long will you go on holding yourself guilty?” Sana asked, placing her hand over Nazli’s.

“I couldn’t make Baba understand anything. Who knows what he thought of me. He misunderstood me terribly.” Nazli spoke for the first time in many days.

“Baba was troubled mostly because of the shop, Nazli — not because of you,” Sana tried to explain. “There were many reasons. One after another, every hardship broke him down.”

Nazli kept recalling all of Javaid’s worries.

“What need was there for you to share your whole life story with Anita Bhabhi? Since when did you start talking to her so much?” Sana’s tone carried both concern and reproach.

“I don’t even know myself, Sana. After so many months of depression, I simply needed some way to vent.”

“But did you find only Anita Bhabhi’s shoulder to cry on?” Sana couldn’t help regretting Nazli’s foolishness.

“Anita Bhabhi didn’t say a word even after hearing everything. But as soon as Amir Bhai overheard, a storm broke loose in this house. He didn’t even know the whole story, yet he lost control completely,” Nazli said, shaking her head.

“He’s a man — his ‘honour’ woke up,” Sana said coldly.

“And he, who himself married for love? Where was his honour then, when he used to meet someone’s daughter in hiding?” Nazli was stung by Sana’s remark.

“Not necessarily in hiding,” Sana said thoughtlessly.

“Oh really? Did he meet her openly at Anita Bhabhi’s house? Is that how this ‘love marriage’ happened?” Nazli asked, looking straight into her eyes.

“All right, leave it now. You shouldn’t have said all that in front of Anita Bhabhi. Whatever she is, she’s still an outsider to us.”

“She is not an outsider — nor has she ever treated us like one. The outsider is our own brother, who made a spectacle of me without even knowing the truth,” Nazli said, irritated.

“Whatever it is, in families like ours, a girl’s love affair is never seen in a good light,” Sana said — bitter but true.

“And a boy’s affair? That isn’t shameful for families like ours?” Nazli shot back.

“If you’re hinting at Amir Bhai, don’t forget that Ammi never gave Anita Bhabhi any respect. Even today she isn’t regarded with the honour that relationship deserves.”

“That’s entirely our fault, not hers. What harm is there in marrying by choice? If our son can be forgiven, why not our daughter-in-law? If the man I loved had married me and his family had treated me as an outcast the same way, would that really have made me a bad woman?”

Nazli had an answer for everything. Since the day Amir had humiliated her before everyone, she had been burning inside. Now, after so many days, she finally had a chance to defend herself — and she wanted to say it all.

“We’re not here to prove who’s right or wrong between Bhabhi and Bhai. But you should have told me everything — not Anita Bhabhi,” Sana said, though inwardly she agreed with much of what she had just heard.

“I hadn’t meant to tell anyone. I don’t know how that day…” Nazli fell silent.

“The age you’re in — everyone sees life as a film or a drama, and they start acting the same way,” Sana said, not looking at her, yet secretly acknowledging the truth in Nazli’s words.

“I don’t watch films or dramas. I only see that in this house, no one ever saw a single good thing in me. No matter what I achieved, no one ever had the time to appreciate it. No one ever told me I was beautiful, that I had talent. So when someone finally said those things to me, I felt that only he truly cared for me — that only he saw the real good in me.” Unwillingly, tears streamed down Nazli’s face.

“And I was foolish too. I had no experience of judging people — that’s why I was easily deceived. But the moment I realized I was about to cross a wrong boundary, I stopped myself right there. Is that not something to be proud of?”

“When did I ever say that you did something wrong?” Sana said gently, trying to reassure her.

“You didn’t say it — but not everything needs to be said.”

For a while, both sisters fell silent.

“When is your supplementary exam?” Sana suddenly remembered.

“By the end of this month.”

“Then work hard now, and somehow pass. Who knows what the future of this house will be, or whether you’ll even have another chance to study.” The thought of the family’s finances made Sana uneasy.

“What will happen to Baba’s shop now? How will everything run?” Nazli asked anxiously.

“For now, I don’t know. Amir Bhai probably won’t go there anymore,” Sana said.

“Not probably — certainly,” Nazli replied with quiet conviction.

“Did Ammi eat?”

“I told her many times, but she didn’t. She just nibbles once or twice a day.”

“Tell her to eat. She won’t even speak to me,” Nazli said, worried.

“Yes, I’ll go tell her now,” Sana said, rising and leaving the room.

Nazli again sank into the whirlpool of her thoughts — from remorse, to guilt, to loneliness; she was battling every kind of feeling. Each member of the household was bearing Javaid’s death in their own different way.

✦✦✦

“I’ve decided — as soon as Zain is released from prison, I’ll get him engaged,” Huma suddenly said to Afzal as they sat together. She looked relatively calm now that Zain had completed his first month of sentence.

“How did that thought suddenly come into your head?” Afzal asked, pulling out a dining chair.

“I should have done it earlier.” Huma poured tea into her cup as she sat down.

“What exactly are you trying to say? I don’t understand.” Afzal was startled.

“If I had done it earlier, he would never have wasted his time with those spoiled friends of his, nor would all this have happened.” Huma presented a new logic for Zain’s supposed innocence.

“Then why not with that girl you created such a fuss about — what was her name… Nazli? You should have engaged him to her,” Afzal said calmly.

“She wasn’t from our class, Afzal; otherwise I’d never have scolded Zain over her.” The arrogance of class was clear in Huma’s tone.

“That was scolding? You turned it into a public spectacle — as if your son had married her outright!” Afzal’s words dripped with sarcasm.

“If I hadn’t stopped him, that girl would have trapped him one day,” Huma said without the slightest regret.

“Oh really?” Afzal’s lips curved into a sardonic smile.

“Maybe you’re mistaken about your son, but I’m not. Zain was only flirting with that middle-class girl.”

“And how can you say that so confidently?”

“Because boys and girls who truly love don’t abandon each other overnight just because their parents disapprove. And in our class, love marriages are no scandal at all.”

“Whatever it is, wrong is wrong in my eyes. It was Zain’s love for me that made him obey me instantly,” Huma said proudly.

“Hmph!” Afzal smiled faintly.

“Zain would have left that girl soon enough anyway. And if he really cared so much for your words, he’d have focused on his studies. Don’t forget — he’s still stuck in A-levels, while his peers have entered professional life.”

Afzal couldn’t hide the bitterness in his tone.

“You care only that he’s stuck in A-levels, not that he’s stuck in prison! Day and night I think only of how soon he’ll complete his sentence and return,” Huma said helplessly, recalling her son.

“And do you think I don’t care? Why else would I have gone after him to Bangkok? You have no idea how painful those days were for me — to see my son behind bars instead of at some worthy place. You can’t imagine my torment.”

Afzal struggled to control his anger. Their conversations about Zain never ended peacefully.

“I don’t understand — when months still remain before his release, why are you already talking of engagement and marriage?” Afzal turned back to his breakfast.

“If I start looking now, I’ll find a good match in time. These days good girls aren’t easy to find,” Huma said, sipping juice.

“And good boys are just as scarce. Zain is hardly any good girl’s choice. What will you even say when asking for her hand — that your son is currently serving a sentence for drug smuggling in Bangkok?”

Afzal’s frustration with Zain was something Huma always turned into an explosion. She would never admit — at least before Afzal — that there was anything lacking in her son. She blamed Zain’s failures on everyone else’s wrong decisions — never her own. Yet deep down, she knew his uselessness all too well. During her twenty-day stay in Bangkok, she had visited him in prison almost daily, and in those brief, painful meetings she had scolded him for his mistakes. But to admit those mistakes before Afzal would have meant conceding defeat to Sumbal and her children — something she could not do.

“I never said I’d arrange his match before his return. I was only informing you of my next plan,” Huma replied irritably.

“And it’s not a good plan. I think when he returns, he should first go to a rehabilitation centre” Afzal said seriously.

“And what good will that do?”

“Zain has become quite depressed in jail. I fear he may even have started using drugs,” Afzal said, voicing his concern.

“Zain has nothing to do with drugs. He was dragged into this mess because of a foolish friend,” Huma said firmly.

“Even so, going to a rehabilitation center would be important for his mental health,” Afzal said thoughtfully.

“He still has months to spend there,” Huma sighed.

“Don’t worry. I’ve spoken to the lawyer and also to Ikram Akhtar in Bangkok to look after Zain’s needs. Ikram has assured me he’ll visit him regularly,” Afzal said, naming the same cousin of his friend who had helped him in Bangkok.

“His wife and family looked after me well too,” Huma agreed.

“I’ll go to Bangkok myself in a few days; it’ll reassure him,” Afzal said — his love for Zain always practical.

“I’ll go with you. I can’t even speak to him on the phone; seeing him there is the only peace I get,” Huma said sadly.

“It’s only a matter of a few months — then, God willing, Zain will come home,” Afzal said with hope.

“In shā’ Allāh,” Huma echoed softly, and after Afzal left, she began thinking once again about Zain’s marriage.

✦✦✦

Nazli sat in the examination hall, writing her paper. Only five minutes were left before the exam ended, and her hand moved swiftly across the sheet. When the allotted time was up, she heard the invigilator’s sharp voice and stopped writing. Feeling satisfied that her paper had gone well, she sat back for a moment, drawing a long breath of relief. For a fleeting instant, she thought of Kashan — but then Sana’s words echoed again in her ears, urging her toward practicality and strength. With a deep sigh, she gathered her things and walked out of the hall. Later that evening, as they sat together, Sana spoke again:

“I was thinking,” she began carefully, “if I sell some of my jewellery and give the money to Amir Bhai for payment to the bank, then maybe our furniture shop can be saved from being seized. What do you think?” She had been considering this for days and now presented what she thought was the best solution.

“But do you know how much money is needed for that?” Nazli asked.

“Yes, about four lakh. I asked Amir Bhai.” Sana replied.

“Will Shahzad Bhai agree to you selling the jewellery?” Nazli asked, naming Sana’s husband.

“I don’t intend to tell him. And besides, I have some money saved from a committee,” Sana explained in detail.

“Sana, where should I work?” Nazli asked in an innocent tone.

“How can I say in that regard? Just know that to run this house at least thirty thousand rupees a month will be needed.”

“Where will I get such a good job?” Nazli said hopelessly.

“It would’ve been better if you hadn’t refused Ahmer’s proposal. At least you’d be living peacefully in Dubai today.”

“Whatever happens is by Allah’s will — and always for our own good,” Nazli said thoughtfully.

“It would’ve been better if you’d been married while Baba was alive. Now how will this responsibility be fulfilled?” Sana’s words, though practical, were correct.

“No matter; in any case, I’ve no interest in marriage right now,” Nazli said wearily.

“Nazli, you never told me who that boy was — the one you liked? And where did he go?” Sana asked simply.

“There was no one. Leave those things.” Nazli brushed off the question. She had no interest anymore in speaking of Zain.

Hearing her tone, Sana too thought it best to drop the matter.

“You might look for a school-teaching job, but the problem is that with this qualification it’s unlikely anyone will hire you,” Sana offered a suggestion, but simultaneously extinguished the faint hope Nazli had.

“I have an idea in mind. Maybe something can work out,” Nazli said after thinking for a moment.

Sana looked at her, doubtful yet hopeful, and said nothing more.

✦✦✦

“Who is this girl — Nazli?”

From the day Tazeen had heard the name Nazli from Kashan’s lips, she had wanted to know more details. Kashan had already diverted his mind completely away from her.

“There was a girl — very beautiful — but perhaps she didn’t like me,” Kashan said in an utterly plain tone.

“‘Was’ meaning what? Where is she now?” Tazeen asked, taking a sip of coffee.

“When I told her she was very beautiful, she got offended and began to scold me,” Kashan told her with childlike innocence.

Tazeen burst out laughing.

“Maybe she isn’t like today’s fast, free-minded girls,” Tazeen said, still smiling.

“Maybe not — certainly not. She belongs to a middle-class family and thinks a bit differently.” Kashan’s tone held no sarcasm, nor any criticism of Nazli — only quiet reflection.

“Surely a decent girl — one who takes a boy’s compliment as flirting,” Tazeen affirmed.

“Yes, she took it far too much as flirting, though I only said what I felt.” Kashan added with sincerity.

“You could have explained that to her,” Tazeen suggested.

“I did — but she wasn’t willing to listen and told me never to contact her again.” Since childhood, Kashan had never hidden anything from Tazeen.

“Well, everyone has their own likes and dislikes. At least you’ll never have the regret that you kept your feelings unspoken,” Tazeen said with a smile.

“Truly, that regret I won’t have,” Kashan sighed.

“Imran called — I told him your viewpoint about Aleena, and also that you already know about her divorce,” Tazeen said, looking toward Kashan.

“Oh really? And then?” Kashan asked, slightly anxious.

“Then he was surprised — he hadn’t expected you would already know,” Tazeen replied seriously.

“But Kashan, I want to arrange your engagement somewhere before you go to America for your residency,”

Tazeen expressed her wish.

“Why are you suddenly so worried about my engagement these days?” Kashan smiled faintly.

“Because when you return from America, I don’t want to start looking for a girl then. I want you to get married right away,” she explained.

“I’ll be back in only three years. Do you think I’ll grow old by then?” Kashan teased.

“I just want someone who’ll take care of me after you leave. If you’re engaged, your fiancée will visit me now and then,” Tazeen smiled softly.

“Who can take care of you more than I? When I’m gone, no one can replace me,” Kashan said with playful affection.

“Anyway, you’re so busy with your boutique.” “Yes, truly busy — but still, see, I’m home every evening. After you leave, I’ll feel so strange.”

Kashan set his laptop aside, came to sit beside his mother, and lovingly said,

“I can’t bear to see you sad. I won’t go to America.”

“Oh no — I want to see you succeed soon. You’re not just to become a doctor but an outstanding one,” Tazeen said, caressing his head tenderly.

“But you’re already upset about my going.”

“No — I was only pretending to be sad,” she said with a smile, and both laughed.

The sound of that laughter lingered warmly through the house — though neither of them could know that destiny had already begun weaving their threads toward a better future.

✦✦✦

It was time for Sana to leave. The very thought of her departure made both Roshan Ara and Nazli uneasy. Even though Sharmeen and Ameen were still at home, the two women felt a suffocating emptiness — the kind that comes when the last support begins to slip away. There was no grown man left in the house, and Ameen was only a seventh-grade student.

“Why do you need to give Amir so much money? You should ask Shahzad first.” Roshan Ara sat with both her daughters; Nazli was helping Sana pack her things.

“It’s necessary, Ammi. If we pay a few instalments to the bank, at least they won’t seize the shop so soon — and once the shop runs, some income will come too. I’ll tell Shahzad everything when the time comes, don’t worry.” Sana repeated the reasoning she had given for days.

“What income! Jameel has never done anything profitable. Amir should have tried to run the shop himself for a while, then gone to his father-in-law if he wished.”

Roshan Ara shook her head in disbelief.

“Ammi, Amir bhai won’t do anything now. Whatever has to be done, we must do — you, Nazli, and I.” Sana replied quickly.

“Nazli and I? How so?” Roshan Ara frowned, not understanding.

“Yes, now Nazli will work somewhere — and you must let her if she gets a job.” Sana tried to persuade her mother gently.

“Where will Nazli work? Where will she get a job? Even if she does, how will this house run on such a small salary?” Roshan Ara asked in surprise, half in despair.

“Once she starts working, everything will gradually get better, In shā’ Allāh.” Nazli said nothing — but Sana herself kept answering all her mother’s objections.

“Now everyone talks of saving this house, but no one ever thought of saving Javaid.” Roshan Ara said softly in reply.

Her words pierced Nazli’s heart like a thorn. Deep down, Roshan Ara still held both Nazli and Amir responsible for Javaid’s death. Sana left — but she left all her burdens on Nazli’s shoulders.

✦✦✦

After much thought, Nazli decided to ask Professor Najeeb for help in finding a job. In the entire world, he was the only man she trusted — one who had guided her many times before. When she reached college, he was still in class, giving a lecture. About half an hour later, she saw him emerge, surrounded by students. Smiling faces passed her by, but Nazli’s face remained clouded with worry.

“Sir,” she greeted softly, stepping forward.

“How are you, Nazli?”

He returned her greeting with his characteristic smile, visibly surprised to see her.

“All well? What brings you to college today?” he asked immediately.

“Sir, I came today only to meet you — I have something important to discuss.”

Nazli spoke hesitantly, choosing her words with care.

“Is everything alright? By the way, how was your paper?” He asked suddenly, remembering.

“Sir, the paper went very well — far better than I expected.” Nazli smiled politely.

“That’s good. Shall we talk here or in my office?” He balanced a few books and a file in his hands as he spoke.

“Sir, let’s talk in your office.” Nazli replied quickly.

Walking through the corridor, Professor Najeeb led her into his office. After completing a couple of short calls, he turned his full attention to her.

“Sir, about a month and a half ago, my father passed away suddenly.” Nazli began in a trembling voice.

“Oh!” Professor Najeeb exclaimed — that was all he could manage at first.

“Was he ill?” he asked after a pause.

“No, it was a heart attack — and then…” She stopped mid-sentence; even speaking of his death was painful.

“May Allah grant you and your family patience,” he said softly, his voice filled with sympathy.

“Sir, the reason I came today is that I urgently need a job. We’re going through financial trouble, and you know my qualification isn’t strong enough yet for a proper position. If you could help me in any way, I’d be very grateful.” Nazli stated her purpose plainly.

Professor Najeeb fell silent, thinking deeply. The request was simple yet heavy, and it troubled him.

“Where would you like to work?” he asked at last.

“Sir, anywhere — wherever a girl like me can work with respect. Please keep this CV.” Nazli said, taking an envelope from her bag and handing it to him.

“Alright, I’ll do my best — but it may take some time.” He replied after a thoughtful pause.

“That’s fine, Sir; I’ll wait. Only please remember I badly need this job — and besides you, I see no one who can help me.” Tears welled in Nazli’s eyes.

“I told you I’ll try my best; don’t worry.” Professor Najeeb reassured her gently.

“Thank you, Sir. I’ll be waiting for your call about the job.” Nazli rose, said goodbye, and left the room, placing her faith in him once more.

Though barely thirty-five, Professor Najeeb had never married. Yet, despite being the youngest and most admired lecturer on campus, he always maintained a distance from his students — especially the girls. He knew his boundaries well; a reflection of both his education and upbringing. Through his integrity, he had earned genuine respect in the college. Nazli too had always admired this decency — otherwise, she would never have shared so much of her private life with him.

Four or five days passed without a response. Then, exactly a week later, his call came.

“The best part,” he said, “is that if you impress them in the interview, your boss will herself be a lady.”

Nazli felt instant relief. After thanking him repeatedly, she reached the address he had given, on the appointed day and hour.

As she entered the office, the receptionist smiled politely.

“Hello, are you Nazli Shafi?”

“Yes.” Nazli nodded nervously — it was her first job interview.

“Please go to Miss Saira,” the receptionist said.

“Miss Saira will take my interview?” Nazli asked, smiling uncertainly.

“Oh no, your interview will be taken by Ma’am herself. Miss Saira is her personal secretary.”

The receptionist smiled again.

Hearing that, Nazli exhaled softly and went into Miss Saira’s room. After a brief formal interview, Miss Saira asked her to wait and went into the boss’s cabin. For no clear reason, Nazli felt afraid. She only knew the position was for a personal secretary and required no special qualification. It wasn’t the interview that frightened her — it was the thought of her family’s worsening finances. She needed this job at any cost. From the office atmosphere, she gathered at least that she’d be working among women, not men.

“Please go inside, to Ma’am’s room.” Lost in her thoughts, Nazli was startled by Saira’s voice. Gathering herself, she whispered a short prayer under her breath and entered the room.

“May I come in, Ma’am?”

“Please come in,” came a warm, smiling reply.

Encouraged, Nazli stepped forward and saw a woman of about fifty seated behind a large wooden desk.

“I hope you didn’t have any trouble finding this place?”

“No, I reached quite comfortably.” Nazli smiled politely.

“Okay, first let me introduce myself, then I’ll take your interview. My name is Tazeen Athar, and I’m the owner of this boutique. Eighteen years ago, I founded it on a very small scale — and today, what you see before you is its success.”

Tazeen smiled as she spoke, her calm tone instantly easing Nazli’s nerves.

✦✦✦

Roshan Ara opened her purse. Inside were only a few coins and a few crumpled rupee notes. She counted them again and again, yet the total came to barely one hundred and fifty rupees. At the door stood the milkman, insistent that he would not leave without payment for the two months' outstanding bill.

"We poor folks, Baji — our hearth burns only with these few rupees."

"Alright, but I told you — my son is out of town. When he returns, you'll get your money." Roshan Ara had nothing left to offer except those few false words.

"Baji, will you keep waiting for your son for fifteen hundred rupees?" The man's patience had worn thin from her daily excuses.

"Since my husband's death, it's my son who runs the house. You know, before today I've never delayed your payment." She said this in a grief-stricken voice, as if her honesty could somehow pay the debt.

"Until my previous balance is cleared, I won't deliver more milk." The milkman spoke harshly and turned to leave.

"Come again after two or three days; you'll get your money then." She pleaded for a few days' respite before closing the door. The milkman muttered curses under his breath as he walked away.

Roshan Ara shut the gate and came back inside, tears welling up as she placed the small pile of coins back into her purse.

"Will my children and I really die of hunger?"

Her mind whirled with anxious thoughts. Living in grief and fear had hollowed her out; her face bore the pallor of illness.

"What happened, Ammi? What did he say?" Suddenly Ameen appeared, startling her.

"He won't give milk from tomorrow." She sighed.

"So what, we'll live without milk." Ameen said with childlike simplicity, reading the worry etched across his mother's face.

"Yes, we will — but what all will we have to live without, I can't tell." Her eyes filled again, and tears rolled down her cheeks.

Ameen stood silently, helpless before his mother's sorrow. He was nearing the end of boyhood and now fully understood their hardships.

“If only Amir had thought that in this hard time he should stand with us. If he’d worked a little with Jameel at the shop, some money would’ve come home. But no — he left everything and went away.” She spoke half to herself, half to the empty walls.

Just then, Sharmeen entered the room.

“Ammi, shall I start going to the shop?” Ameen asked suddenly, perhaps moved by seeing his mother cry.

“What will you do there?” she asked in surprise.

“Work — what else.” He replied innocently.

“But you’re still small; children your age don’t work.” She tried to end the matter gently.

“But I’m not a child anymore. I’ll be in 8th class now.” Like all children, Ameen felt older than he was.

“Still, you can’t run a shop like Amir — and you don’t even know the work.” Sharmeen supported her mother’s objection.

“I don’t know it yet, but Jameel bhai will teach me.” Ameen’s voice carried an unexpected determination.

“Don’t trouble me more; I’m already very upset. Don’t eat my head.” Roshan Ara silenced him sharply.

Ameen and Sharmeen slipped quietly out of the room. Yet, Ameen had planted a seed of thought in her mind — perhaps even he could help save the home. Roshan Ara set her purse aside, sat with her head in her hands, oblivious to everything around her. Moments later, Sana’s call came.

“Ammi, today was Nazli’s interview, right? Did she get the job?” Sana asked right after greetings.

“I don’t know; she hasn’t returned yet.”

“Then call her, ask her.”

“From where? My phone has no balance. Here we barely have food to eat, Sana.” Her tone was heavy with exhaustion.

“Everything will be alright, Ammi. Have faith in Allah. I’ll send you some money in a few days.”

“How much will you keep sending and giving, my child? You’ve already done so much.” Tears streamed down her cheeks again.

“It’s fine, just pray Nazli gets the job — then, with some income from the shop too, things will get easier.”

“On what basis will Nazli get a good job? And even if she does, her pay won’t be much, you’ll see. You gave her this job idea and left. I wish I had married her off while Javaid was alive — that would have been better.” Roshan Ara went on lamenting, her voice breaking between sobs. Her faith in Nazli’s employment was small — but her grief, vast and relentless, flowed without pause.

✦✦✦

Tazeen had barely finished introducing herself when the office boy entered quietly, carrying a tray of tea. He placed a gleaming cup before Tazeen and another before Nazli, then left the room. To Nazli, the meeting felt less like an interview and more like a personal conversation.

“You can talk to me comfortably while having your tea,”

Tazeen said kindly, nudging her cup slightly forward.

“Yes.”

Nazli began to feel at ease, though she still didn’t know whether she would get the job. She couldn’t help being moved by Tazeen’s warmth. Her voice overflowed with gentleness — something Nazli had not expected. Usually, women in the fashion world displayed a kind of calculated glamour, but Tazeen Athar looked simple — elegant in her plainness, confident in her poise. Because of that, even if Nazli didn’t get the job, she felt certain she would not stumble in her words.

“I’ve read your CV, Nazli,” Tazeen said, setting the paper aside. Nazli waited silently for her remarks.

“The issue I see is that you’re still a student, and you have no prior job experience.”

“Before this, I never needed to work.” Nazli said hesitantly.

“But will you be able to manage full-time work along with studies?” Tazeen asked gently.

“I plan to do my bachelor’s degree privately. Right now, I’m waiting for my Intermediate results.”

“As you must know, Nazli, I need an administrator. The job isn’t technical, but it does demand commitment.” Tazeen said thoughtfully.

“If you give me a chance, I won’t disappoint you.” Nazli spoke earnestly, her voice trembling slightly — a mixture of hope and desperation.

“I expect that from you.” Tazeen smiled approvingly.

“I’ve taken several interviews for this post. Many girls came — more qualified and experienced than you — yet I still wish to offer the position to you.” Her tone carried both affection and sympathy. Nazli could feel its warmth.

“That would make me very happy.” Nazli’s face brightened.

“But there’s one condition — and you must fulfill it.” Tazeen said, looking at her closely.

“Yes?” Nazli’s heart gave a nervous leap.

“Don’t worry — it’s nothing improper. What I’m about to say is for your own good.” Reading her expression, Tazeen smiled gently.

Nazli steadied herself and smiled back.

“I want you, along with this job, to give first priority to your studies. Never abandon or neglect them at any stage. I’ll support you as much as possible in that.”

Contrary to her expectations, Tazeen’s words filled Nazli with courage.

“Thank you — I also intend to continue my studies.” Nazli replied gratefully.

“Good. So, when will you join us?” Tazeen concluded the interview.

“Tomorrow.” Nazli blurted without thinking.

“Oh no, no rush. Take your appointment letter today; you can even join after a week if you like.” For the first time, Tazeen dropped the formal tone and spoke casually.

“Alright… may I ask what my salary will be?” Nazli asked shyly.

“I’m offering you twenty thousand to start — but I’ll increase it soon based on your performance.” The amount was more than she had dared hope for. Though still less than what her family truly needed, it felt like a divine relief in their storm of hardship.

“Thank you.”

She decided not to speak further about pay. In a country where even degree-holders struggle for jobs without connections — and she had neither — this was nothing short of fortune.

“If you have any other questions, ask freely.” Tazeen said warmly.

“No, nothing else. I only hope to meet your expectations.” Nazli replied carefully.

“Insha’Allah. Then let’s end your interview here. Take your appointment letter from my office coordinator — and congratulations on your new job.”

Tazeen smiled and extended her hand. As Nazli shook it, a smile spread across her own face as well. She went to the coordinator’s desk, and within minutes, received her appointment letter. It stated a salary of twenty thousand rupees.

Tears shimmered in her eyes. In those twenty thousand, she could already see the solution to twenty thousand problems.

✦✦✦

Carefully opening the cap of the toothpaste, he peered through one eye into the tube. The tobacco, wrapped tightly in a small plastic packet, had lodged itself deep at the far end. Perhaps the plastic had stuck to the last traces of paste, clinging stubbornly to the metal-like lining inside. Extracting that packet was a tedious affair. After striking the tube several times against the palm of his hand, the packet inched toward the opening — yet still refused to come out. At last, after much struggle and silent frustration, while staring vacantly at the toothpaste tube again and again, his eyes fell upon a small steel pin lying on the floor. Joining its two ends to form a crude scissor-like hook, he carefully tried to pull the packet out. Just then, the sharp echo of heavy boots resounded down the corridor — the rapid, rhythmic thud of a guard’s footsteps heading his way. Zain quickly shoved the pin back into the toothpaste, closed the cap, and placed it where it had been. Whenever prisoners had visitors, the warden would, as always, call out the names before nine in the morning. Because Zain’s sentence was comparatively lighter, he had been shifted to a slightly better block — but even this cell, like the rest, was no more than a few narrow yards of concrete. No matter how vast the world beyond might have been, for Zain, imprisonment itself was the greatest confinement of all.

The voice rang down the corridor, announcing that visitors had arrived for certain inmates. Weary and indifferent, Zain placed the toothpaste back over the sink and walked slowly out of the cell. He was not interested in meeting anyone. Usually, it was either Afzal who came — or Zain’s lawyer. When Huma had been in Bangkok, she

came almost every other day, but the intercom booth, filled with the noise of other voices, was never a place for true conversation.

Besides, Zain had nothing to say. And Huma, as always, had little more than tears and unnecessary instructions. Upon reaching the visiting hall, Zain stood before the booth indicated to him. The intercom bell rang, and he heard Huma's voice through the receiver. Stepping slightly aside, he looked through the glass partition and saw her standing there, waving at him from the other side.

"How are you, Zain?" Huma asked softly, her eyes already glistening.

"Fine. How are you?" Zain replied, his voice cold and restrained.

"Afzal and I, both of us, came to see you." There was restlessness in her tone.

"You know very well that here in this prison, no one really 'meets'. One can only talk — standing so far apart. So what's the point?" His tone was indifferent, almost detached.

"Hello, what are you saying, Zain?" Perhaps Huma couldn't hear him clearly. The noise of the visiting hall always drowned half the voices — even when one strained to listen, words faded midway.

"I said I'm already too disturbed here. Please, don't come and disturb me further." His irritation was unmistakable.

"What are you saying? Don't you even miss us, Zain?"

"What will come of missing someone? After all, I'm here only because of you people."

His words struck like cold steel.

"Because of us? What have we done? Your father did so much for you. Do you know how worried he has been — and you—?"

"I don't have time to argue here with you. It's better that you people stop coming to meet me. Just wait patiently for me to be released." Zain said, cutting her short.

"But we worry because of you, Zain, my son." Her voice trembled, breaking mid-sentence.

"Worrying won't change anything. One and a half months have already passed — the rest will pass too. Just wait."

"Your father has come with me too, but they allow only one family member to meet per day. He'll come tomorrow to see you."

“There’s no need. I’ll refuse to meet him myself. You can tell him I don’t wish to see anyone.”

“What nonsense are you talking! How can I possibly tell Afzal that? We both came from Pakistan only to see you and meet you.”

“What are you seeing here anyway? Standing this far, you can only hear my voice — and I have nothing to talk about.”

Zain was still speaking when, as always, a loud bell echoed through the hall — the signal that visitation time was over. Without another word, he placed the receiver back on its cradle and walked out of the booth to join the line of exiting inmates.

On the other side, Huma kept calling, “Hello! Hello!” But he was already gone.

She left the booth, scanning the crowd anxiously — but Zain was nowhere to be seen. As always, she failed to catch even a final glimpse. When a guard spoke to her in Thai, she realized the visit was over. Outside, in the waiting area, Afzal sat waiting.

“Did you see him? How is Zain?” he asked immediately.

“He’s fine,” she replied curtly. She could not bring herself to repeat the words Zain had said. Already torn inside, she had no strength for another conversation — not even with her husband.

The truth was simple: whenever Zain spoke, he meant every word. And if he had now decided not to meet anyone again, he would not. She could not imagine how to tell this to Afzal. They had flown all the way to Bangkok just to see him. Even a few minutes of distant conversation had been a kind of solace for them both. Had she known his thoughts earlier, perhaps she would never have come.

“You told him, right, that I’ll go to meet him tomorrow?” Afzal asked once they reached the hotel.

“Afzal…” She hesitated, gathering her thoughts.

“Zain was saying that in all the noise of the visiting hall, he can’t hear anything properly.”

“So?” Afzal asked, confused.

“And… the meeting time is also very short.” She spoke in fragments, buying herself time.

“What are you trying to say? We already know that. What difference does it make if Zain says it?”

“Zain was saying… what’s the point of such meetings, when even conversation isn’t possible.” She avoided his eyes.

“Not meet him?” Afzal grasped the meaning instantly.

“Zain said it’s better he just refuses. Why stand in line and go through this ordeal for nothing?” She finally confessed, her voice barely steady.

“In other words,” Afzal said grimly, “your son not only refuses to meet us, he doesn’t even wish to hear our voices. Does he not realize we came from another country just to hear his?”

“That’s exactly what he said — that we come from so far and then…”

“Tell me exactly what he said, Huma. He must have said he’s not interested in meeting anyone — right?” Afzal knew both mother and son too well; he understood before she could finish.

“Please don’t jump to conclusions. In a way, what Zain said makes sense. The meeting hardly lasts ten or fifteen minutes, and half that time goes in trying to hear each other.”

“I’m amazed — hearing this from you. I’d been telling you for months that even if you go see him every day in Bangkok for six months, nothing will change.” Afzal reminded her sternly.

“Yes, but now I understand. Besides, it’s not necessary we take everything Zain says negatively.” Huma tried to sound composed.

“We’ve taken every one of his words positively all his life, Huma — that’s exactly why he’s where he is today.”

“I’m sick and tired of listening to the same thing from both you and your son! He says it’s all because of me — and you say the same — but neither of you ever looks within yourselves to see what you’ve done.” She burst out suddenly, her tone louder than it had ever been.

“Oh, so Zain has blamed you today.” Afzal ignored her anger and asked flatly.

“I think I may have overreacted that day — when I saw him with that girl.” She couldn’t recall Nazli’s name, though it lingered somewhere in her memory.

“And you forget that when his many lies were exposed, you said plenty more to him. His academic failures had already hurt you enough.” Afzal reminded her pointedly.

“Yes, but truly, I just couldn’t bear to see him giving a ring to that girl, binding himself to her. The rest didn’t matter as much to me.” She confessed softly.

“Whereas, in my view, those other things should have mattered more. I told you countless times — Zain could never be serious about any girl. At his age, he was only doing what boys his age do.” Afzal’s voice was calm, but his words cut deep. She sat down on the bed, holding her head.

“That’s why I always said — teach your son honesty, the way Sumbul taught hers. A boy who lies to his parents — how can he be truthful to anyone else?”

“All this is because of your endless comparisons — sometimes between me and Sumbul, sometimes between her children and my son.” Huma shook her head bitterly.

“The facts are before you, Huma. Look where Sumbul’s children are today — and look where your son sits now.”

“As a father, you too had duties, Afzal. You always said your son, never our son. You never showed concern as a father — only criticism. That’s why he drifted from you. He never received encouragement from your side.”

“In my eyes, he’s never done anything worth praise. If you both had wanted, we would never have seen this day.” Afzal said, refusing as always to take any blame.

Realizing the futility of continuing, Huma left the room in silence. To argue more — especially about Zain — was useless. The next day, Afzal went to the prison to meet Zain. As expected, Zain refused the visit. Returning to the hotel, Afzal said nothing — but Huma understood. They took the next day’s flight back home. For Afzal, Zain’s refusal was a wound that would not heal. For Huma, it was his words that haunted her nights. She now truly felt that perhaps she had been overly harsh, overly proud, and that she had misunderstood her own son’s heart. Neither of them ever again found the courage to return to Bangkok — because they both knew Zain would not meet them.

✦✦✦

Nazli had begun her job as secretary-cum-administrator at Tazeen Athar’s boutique. Within the first week, Tazeen realised that Nazli was a quiet, self-contained girl who kept strictly to her work. At times, she noticed a certain sadness flicker in the girl’s

eyes, yet she never asked personal questions. Nazli performed every task with meticulous care. It was her first employment, and she belonged to that rare breed of people who could not sit idle even for a minute. Whenever her own assignments ended, she would herself go to Tazeen and ask,

“Ma’am, please give me something more to do.”

Tazeen managed four outlets across the city, the first and main one occupying the ground floor beneath her office. When Nazli finished the paperwork upstairs, she often visited the outlet below, learning its rhythm and befriending the salesgirls. Yet she remained unaware of who Tazeen Athar truly was, or whose unseen hand had guided her to this job.

“Sir, I’m absolutely fine. I just called to thank you.”

After completing her first week, Nazli phoned Professor Najeeb, for she had not yet been able to thank him in person.

“Thank me? For what?” He asked, surprised.

“Sir, the place where you sent me for the job — I’ve been hired there. It’s been exactly one week since I started.” Nazli’s voice brimmed with relief.

“Wonderful! Congratulations.”

“Sir, it’s only because of you — otherwise I was not capable of anything.”

“The credit isn’t mine — it belongs to someone else.” The words escaped him before he could check them.

“Meaning, Sir?” Nazli asked, puzzled.

“Oh no, I mean the credit belongs to that Being who helps all of us in difficult times.” He corrected himself quickly, recalling his promise to Kashan — that Nazli must never learn of the connection between Tazeen and him.

“Yes Sir, nothing happens without Allah’s will — but people are His means, and you’ve always been there for me in bad times.” Nazli smiled softly through the receiver.

“Alright then, when you get your first salary, you must treat me to sweets.” Professor Najeeb laughed.

“Of course, Sir — why not, In sha Allah.” Nazli smiled, ending the call with a lighter heart than she had felt in months.

Along with Nazli's new employment, her younger brother Ameen, with her full encouragement, began going to Jameel Bhai's furniture shop.

"What's the use? One son of Javaid had gone to that same shop — didn't you see what happened? We lost even the shop in that mess." Roshan Ara spoke bitterly when she heard Nazli persuading Ameen.

"Ammi, if to run this household all of us have to work, then there's nothing wrong in it. And besides, the shop is already running in loss. Ameen's on summer vacation — instead of wasting time at home playing, it's better he goes to the shop." Nazli repeated patiently, as she had done all week.

"You and Sana together have cooked up something. Ameen is still small; he's not some grown man who'll go and manage a shop."

"Then consider him grown. I'm not that old myself, yet I'm working because it's needed. I just want that Baba's shop doesn't go under. Therefore don't speak hopelessly, Ammi. We need your prayers and encouragement right now — isn't that so, Ameen?"

"Exactly! You'll see, I'll learn the work quickly along with Jameel Bhai." The boy's innocent smile filled the room with brief warmth.

From the very next morning, Ameen began going to the shop. But Javaid's old furniture store stood as a monument of loss — its pieces heavy, outdated, untouched by modern taste. The craftsmen had long stopped taking orders on credit. Even neighbouring shopkeepers were astonished to see the small boy working there. When news reached Amir that his younger brother had started sitting in the shop —and worse, that Nazli too had taken an office job — a storm brewed inside him. He came home fuming and argued endlessly with his mother. Roshan Ara listened in silence until she could bear no more, then struck back.

"If your pride has awakened so suddenly, then take over the household expenses. Earn and support the family — I'll have Nazli quit today itself." She glared at him with fierce eyes.

Just then Nazli returned home. After an hour and a half trapped in traffic, the slow-moving bus had finally brought her to her stop. Her life had become a daily struggle — and the very first sentence she heard upon entering stunned her.

"What you've suffered so far is nothing compared to what you'll suffer next because of this girl's shamelessness and waywardness!" Amir thundered.

“Don’t you dare utter a single wrong word about Nazli — I’ll smash your mouth!” Roshan Ara warned through clenched teeth.

“She herself has admitted what she used to do before!” Amir shouted, now staring directly at Nazli.

“She’s done nothing — and you haven’t seen anything with your own eyes — yet you throw accusations as if they were facts! You clung to your wife’s dupatta and abandoned us in misery — and now you have the nerve to talk of responsibility? Do you even know how this house survives month to month?”

“Who can live in a house where immorality reigns?” He snapped, and stormed out.

Nazli stood motionless. Perhaps this humiliation was something she herself had carved into her fate. The more she tried to erase Zain — and all that had ever linked her to him — the more he emerged before her eyes, like an ugly scar that refused to fade. And slowly she began to believe that she was no longer a good girl.

✦✦✦

“What is this? Now I’ll have to spend another whole month without you?” Tazeen said, looking at Kashan’s airline ticket. Kashan was leaving for America in four days.

“Now I have to go give the papers, don’t I? Otherwise I’ll lose the chance for residency in America.” He explained what his mother already knew.

“That’s true — but I’ll get bored here without you.” She ran her fingers affectionately through his hair; even now she sometimes treated him like a little boy — for a mother, a child never truly grows up.

“I know. But you don’t realize how much I’ll miss you myself. By the way, guess who I met today?” Her eyes lit up; she had unexpectedly met an old friend in the mall that afternoon, and both had been astonished to see each other after so many years.

“One of my oldest and dearest friends. We studied together in school. Her family moved to Lahore, and for a few months we exchanged letters — then contact ended altogether. She got married, and so did I.” Tazeen recounted cheerfully while arranging the dinner table.

“Good! But how did you recognise her?” Kashan asked, amused by his mother’s excitement.

“I didn’t — she recognised me! I had gone to my outlet as usual when suddenly someone called out ‘excuse me’ behind me. When I turned, a woman was smiling and said my full name, mentioned Papa and all — so I asked who she was.”

“That’s nice — the world really is a small place. People who part ways somehow meet again. But if you were such good friends, how did you lose touch completely?”

“We didn’t become friends in the digital age, remember. As I told you, when she moved, we exchanged letters for a while, sometimes spoke on the phone. Later her number changed, and the letters stopped too.”

She left briefly to fetch something from the kitchen. When she returned, Kashan asked the question that had long rested in his mind.

“Any updates about Nazli? How’s her job going?”

“Perfect. She’s a very brave and hardworking girl — just the kind of person I needed. Someone who can handle my personal matters along with administrative work.”

“She doesn’t have even the slightest suspicion that I’m your son — or that I had anything to do with getting her this job?”

“Not at all. And even if she does someday, I don’t think it’ll matter much to her. She needed a job — and she’s quite happy to have found one.”

“Do you think she’d quit immediately if she found out my name?”

“But she dislikes me — and she’s told me that herself.” Kashan admitted frankly.

Tazeen burst out laughing.

“And you, on the other hand, like her deeply — don’t you?” She voiced his secret so cleanly that he blushed.

“Mama, don’t you think she’s beautiful?”

“Of course she’s beautiful — and I want to get you both engaged before you go to America. What do you say?”

Kashan froze.

“What?”

“Yes, I really like the girl — simple, beautiful, and above all, extremely decent. What more could one want?”

“But you know she doesn’t like me much. She actually scolded me once when I praised her beauty.”

“Yes — but when I go myself to her house with the proposal, things will be very different.”

“Wow! You’ve really outdone yourself today, Mama — two surprises and good news in one day!”

His face lit up with joy. He loved Nazli deeply — his love one-sided, pure, and unspoken. Such love, untouched by expectation, is the most selfless of all.

“Seems like today is a day of surprises for both of us.”

Tazeen smiled.

“Oh, you never told me your friend’s name — the one you met in the mall!”

“Her name is Huma Akbar — after marriage, it’s Huma Afzal.”

“And you didn’t invite her?”

“Of course I did. She said she’ll visit one day. Her house is quite near my office — maybe someday she’ll drop by the boutique.”

“She has a son named Zain,” Tazeen added casually, and resumed eating.

“Zain,” Kashan repeated softly, as though tasting a word, he already knew.

✦✦✦

Ever since Anita had begun living again in her father’s house, her stepmother, Fareeda, could not find peace. Day and night, she kept poisoning Ikram’s mind against Amir, but no real result came of it. Anita was busy preparing for the arrival of her first child — the joy that now illuminated her face. For the first time in months, happiness had found its way back to her. On the other hand, Amir too was jubilant — and not for one but two reasons. The first, he announced that very evening before Anita and her father.

“It’s done! The deal is done — and a very good one, too! Seventy lakhs in total!”

His voice brimmed with excitement.

“Seventy lakhs? That’s a very good price indeed.” Ikram nodded approvingly.

“As soon as the shop is sold, the entire bank loan with interest will be cleared.” Amir said proudly, taking the first bite of his dinner.

Anita and Fareeda were serving food at the table.

“Will any money be left, or will it all go to the bank?” Ikram asked in a tone that Amir understood very well.

“Why not, Uncle! The bank gave only forty lakhs when the shop was mortgaged, and so far only ten lakhs’ interest has piled up. So I’ll still have about twenty lakhs left — and all of that I intend to invest in your business.”

At that, Ikram’s eyes gleamed; his worry instantly eased. Now he could tolerate Amir’s presence in his home not merely with patience — but with pleasure.

“But Amir, that shop used to bring some income to your family too — what will happen to that now?” Anita, however she was, still worried somewhat for Amir’s family, for she knew well their struggles.

“Oh, there was no income — it was all just talk.” He waved his hand dismissively.

“But now even Ameen has started going to the shop. I spoke to Nazli; she said some work has started.” Anita said, taking a seat beside him.

“It’s better if you don’t mention Nazli at all. Pass me some more rice.” Amir cut her off abruptly.

“When will you get the money?” Ikram asked.

“In at most eight or ten days — once I get the complete documents back from the bank, I’ll hand them over to the buyer, and then I’ll receive the remaining payment.” Amir said confidently, laying out his plan.

“That’s good. At least you’ll be free of the curse of interest.” Ikram said approvingly.

“Of course. I had no other choice but to sell the shop.” Amir replied between bites.

Just then, his mobile phone rang. Seeing the caller ID, he immediately disconnected it and resumed eating as if nothing had happened.

Around 11:30 that night, when Ikram was fast asleep in deep slumber, Fareeda rose to fetch water from the fridge near the veranda. Taking a bottle, she sat wearily on a chair. Moonlight spread across the courtyard in soft, milky waves. As she took slow sips, her eyes caught a moving shadow across the floor tiles — clearly, the outline of a man. Startled at first, she stepped quietly into the courtyard and looked upward. On the rooftop, Amir stood, speaking in low tones on his phone, the glow of his cigarette pulsing with every breath. He was pacing slowly, his voice a mixture of caution and

confidence. Fareeda watched in silence for a long moment. Then, without a sound, she turned and went back inside.

The next morning, as soon as she awoke, she whispered the discovery into Anita's ear.

"Maybe he couldn't sleep — was just walking on the roof." Anita murmured carelessly.

"Aray, he was secretly talking to someone on the phone!" Fareeda said, shaking her as if to jolt her awake.

"Well, Amir isn't going to shout and talk at 11:30 at night, is he? Of course he'll speak in a low voice." Anita snapped, irritated.

"Fine, do as you like — my job was only to warn you. The rest is up to you."

Fareeda stood, gathered her dupatta, and left the room with a shrug. Anita sighed, shaking her head, then muttered under her breath as she began oiling her hair again. Everything happened exactly as Amir had told his father-in-law. Within ten days, the bank released the shop documents. The property now belonged to someone else. Suddenly, Amir's hands were full of money — and he invested a good portion of it into Ikram's business. The rest, he spent lavishly on himself. The new owner of the shop sent his men to Jameel, ordering him to vacate the premises immediately. That very afternoon, Ameen came running home from the shop, banging so hard on the door that Roshan Ara's heart leapt in fear. Panting and trembling, he burst in the moment she opened.

"The shop's been sold!"

"What do you mean, whose shop has been sold?" Roshan Ara asked, unable to comprehend.

"Amir Bhai sold it. The men said to clear out all our things."

She froze. Her face turned pale, her eyes blank with disbelief.

"How could he sell the shop?"

"I don't know. Some people came and told Jameel Bhai the shop's been sold — take your things away. Then Jameel Bhai called Amir Bhai, and he said yes, it's true." Each word from Ameen's lips fell like a stone upon her heart.

To Roshan Ara, the shop had been more than bricks and wood; it was a remnant of Javaid's sweat, his legacy, his pride. Even if it brought home only a few thousand rupees, it had been theirs. Now even that thread of hope was cut.

“Amir has sold the shop — Nazli, what will we do now?” Roshan Ara called her daughter at once to deliver the news.

“But how could Amir Bhai do that? He should have known that we depended on that shop’s little income.” Nazli’s voice shook over the line.

She sat frozen at her desk, surrounded by files and fabric samples, but her mind had gone utterly blank. How could four people live on her twenty-thousand-rupee salary — with rent, school fees, and daily expenses waiting like creditors at the door? That night, Roshan Ara called Amir home and scolded him bitterly — but Amir came prepared with his justifications.

“You yourself used to say the shop didn’t earn anything. Now it’s gone — so what’s the worry?”

“It wasn’t earning, that’s why I sent Ameen there — so he could learn, work, and earn something!”

“What could Ameen possibly do there? Do you even know how the market politics work?”

“Amir, you have no shame. Killing your father didn’t give you peace — now you’ll take my life too?”

Her voice trembled with fury and pain.

“I didn’t kill Father — your daughter did.” He said, looking directly at Nazli.

The air in the room froze. Nazli, Ameen, and Sharmeen stood in stunned silence.

“Enough! Get out of here right now — and don’t ever show me your face again! Out!” Roshan Ara stormed forward, seized his shoulder, and shoved him toward the door. Amir stumbled, then straightened and left without another word. When the door slammed shut, the room filled with sobs. Roshan Ara held her head in her hands and wept bitterly.

“What’s the use of crying now, Ammi.” Nazli said softly, her own heart breaking for her mother.

“How can I not cry? I don’t know what sins of mine have brought me to see this day.”

“Ammi, the One who’s shown us this day will also show us better days. Have faith in Allah.”

But faith, that night, seemed to tremble in her mother's eyes. Roshan Ara wept quietly into her dupatta. And for the first time since his death, she missed Javaid so much it hurt to breathe.

✦✦✦

"There's so much stock — some is still lying with the craftsmen, and the rest is kept in the shop for sale, but nothing is selling," Nazli said as she handed a cup of tea to Jameel Bhai. He sat in the courtyard, facing Roshan Ara, Ameen, and Nazli, while next door a few children were with Sharmeen for tuition.

"We can't very well put all that furniture out on the street just to vacate the shop," Nazli added anxiously.

"Where have you people kept it all for now?"

"For the moment, the shop hasn't been emptied. Today's Sunday, but we must clear it all tomorrow, no matter what," Jameel said, taking a slow sip of tea.

"But where will we take it all tomorrow?" The lines of worry were plainly etched across Roshan Ara's forehead.

"We'll store it at Abdullah Bhai's shop — he's the president of the market union. He respected Javaid Bhai greatly. He himself said to keep everything safely there." What Jameel Bhai said brought a flicker of relief to Nazli and Roshan Ara — at least the furniture wouldn't be lost.

"I just want Ameen to go with you tomorrow and help move everything to Abdullah Bhai's shop," Nazli said.

"We had some custom orders being made in the workshop too — those are stopped now. You know the workshop was on rent," Jameel Bhai said, setting his cup aside.

"Please talk to the union president and ask if we can get a little space somewhere in the market itself — so we can hang up Baba's shop board again and keep working."

Nazli had already drawn up her plan since the previous night — each thought following the next — she only needed Jameel Bhai's help.

"That's absolutely possible. I'm sure Tariq Bhai will do that much for us. Anyway, one door of his shop opens into the back lane; he shouldn't mind," Jameel replied.

"Jameel Bhai, I know this is a difficult time. For now, please give Ameen some of your time. I understand you might want to find other work now," Nazli said softly.

“Go elsewhere? Never — I’m staying right here in this market. Don’t worry, I’ll teach Ameen everything. He’s like a son to me.”

“We’ve fallen into such hardship, Jameel Bhai — one trouble after another keeps descending,” Roshan Ara said sadly.

“Alright, Baji, I’ll take your leave now. Tomorrow I’ll speak with Tariq Bhai and shift the furniture with Ameen,” Jameel Bhai said, rising from his chair.

As Javaid’s oldest and most trusted employee, he had always been treated like family by Javaid’s household — and he too had stood by them through every good and bad time. All the furniture from the shop was soon moved and temporarily stored in a vacant section of Abdullah’s shop in the bazaar. Work at the workshop was stopped; the craftsmen were paid their dues and dismissed. Jameel Bhai handled everything as though it were his own shop, while Ameen stayed by his side, helping with every task. For two weeks, the goods remained locked up. Nazli kept thinking of how she could lay the foundation of the shop once more.

“Now what will we do, Nazli Baji?” Ameen asked the very question she feared herself. He was sitting beside her in her bedroom. Ever since he had started going to the shop, each evening he would return and tell her all that had happened in the day.

“Why do you worry — I’m here, aren’t I? I have my job; Sharmeen is giving tuition; and Sana has promised to send two or three thousand from Qatar. Everything will work out,” Nazli spoke quickly, almost as if she were reassuring herself.

“Amir Bhai doesn’t think of us at all — what’s happened to him?” Ameen asked sadly.

“Nothing’s happened. Just understand — he’s always been that way. And whatever has to be done, we’ll do it together,” Nazli said, trying to comfort him.

“So much of our furniture got wasted. You know, we’d made some new-design centre tables — from those magazines you brought for us!” In his words, she could see both childishness and responsibility mingled.

“Nothing’s gone to waste. You’ll see — I’ll bring Baba’s shop back into the market very soon,” Nazli said with quiet determination.

“How? You mean buy another shop? Jameel Bhai says even a small one costs in lakhs — in crores!” Ameen said, eyes widening as if expecting her surprise.

“There must be rental shops too, right? We’ll find a small one.”

“But where will the rent come from?” Ameen’s question was valid.

“You’ll work hard, and I’ll work with you on furniture designing. I’m sure even if we get a shop for fifteen thousand a month, we’ll manage. I’ll take an advance from my office for the first few months’ rent,” Nazli explained everything in detail.

“And where will you get the advance for that rental shop?” This question wasn’t from Ameen — it came from Roshan Ara, standing in the doorway.

“I’ve thought about that too,” Nazli said.

“From where will you bring it?” Roshan Ara pressed.

“I’ll sell my gold bangle — the one you had made for me,” Nazli said after a brief silence.

“Are you mad? That’s the only bangle I ever had made for your dowry — in better times! Will you sell even that?” Roshan Ara said, coming into the room and sitting down.

“Ammi, we’re surrounded by problems. Marriage and gold bangles are of no use to us right now,” Nazli replied seriously.

“Marriage isn’t useless talk! Have you gone crazy? As soon as I get a proposal for you, I’ll marry you off — understand?”

“Who will arrange my marriage — and who’ll bear the expenses? Amir Bhai? Right now, we can’t afford such illusions, Ammi. I thank Allah every day that I’m here with you all in this hard time. If I had been married and gone away, what would have become of you?” Nazli’s voice grew emotional as she spoke — so much that she didn’t notice the tears rolling from her mother’s eyes.

“I never wanted you to go out and work. It would have been better if your marriage had taken place. Even now, I remember Ahmer’s proposal,” Roshan Ara said in a tone of regret, recalling that same proposal once again.

“Ammi, please forget that proposal now. Allah Himself leads us down the paths that are best for us.”

Nazli had always felt guilty for ending that match, which her parents had so deeply desired — but now, she felt no regret. She was thankful that in these bad times she was with her mother and younger siblings.

“I never thought I’d live to see the day when, in this old age, I’d have to eat from my daughter’s earnings.” Tears streamed down Roshan Ara’s face.

“When sons fail to feed their family, and daughters earn to feed them instead — the sky doesn’t fall, Ammi,” Nazli said gently, trying to comfort her.

“The sky may not fall — but the heart knows how it feels,” Roshan Ara’s tears kept flowing.

“You don’t have only one son, Ammi. Ameen is your son too — and he’ll soon make you proud.” Nazli smiled at Ameen. He, encouraged, began to feel very responsible for his small age.

The next day, Nazli informed Jameel Bhai of all her intentions and requested that he find a small rental shop in the market — so she could re-establish Javaid Furniture and create a stable source of income for the family. Nazli herself began scanning newspaper ads for rental shops, and every evening after work, that became one of her key tasks.

Days kept passing — but no suitable shop appeared.

At last, through Jameel Bhai’s contacts, a shop in the same bazaar was found. Nazli paid the advance rent by selling her gold bangle, but for now, she gave up the plan of taking a loan from her office. She wanted the shop’s income itself to cover the rent within a month. So, as soon as the lease was signed, she personally supervised the shifting of all the furniture from Abdullah Bhai’s shop into the new small rental shop. Ameen and Jameel Bhai tried their best to convince her to let them handle everything — but she, wrapped head to toe in a black shawl, ignored the curious eyes of passers-by and decorated the shop herself, just as she wished. Jameel Bhai was astonished by her dedication. Roshan Ara, too, could hardly believe her daughter’s strength and sense of duty — the same daughter she had once so often misunderstood, especially after her confession of past mistakes. Nazli didn’t stop there. She began introducing Ameen to new furniture designs — researching on the internet during her lunch breaks at the office. She believed the first month of the shop would be crucial. Calling Jameel Bhai home, she showed him — in front of her mother — two or three modern designs of centre tables and sofas. Once those were built and displayed, buyers began to crowd the shop. Ameen spent entire days carrying out her instructions, guiding the craftsmen on design details. His effort was a big part of the shop’s revival. The first twenty days of the month went into preparing modern furniture, and the last ten were spent selling it rapidly. After paying workers’ wages and the electricity bill, the rent was easily managed. Nothing came home yet — but Nazli remained hopeful. She knew the first few months would go into rebuilding the shop’s name in the

market. So engrossed was she in scanning newspapers and the internet that she forgot her Intermediate exam result was still pending — and had already been announced.

✦✦✦

Nazli was busy typing on her laptop when suddenly her mobile phone began ringing — an unfamiliar number flashing on the screen. For a few moments she simply stared at it, trying to recognize the caller. Seeing it was unsaved, she set the phone aside.

The call came again. This time, after a brief hesitation, she picked it up.

“Hello?” Nazli said, bringing the phone to her ear while her fingers continued to move over the keyboard.

“Hello — how are you?”

The voice from the other side sounded familiar, yet she couldn’t place it at once.

“I’m fine — but who’s speaking?” Nazli asked, her fingers freezing on the keys.

“Oh — you’ve deleted my number too?” came Kashan’s disappointed voice from the other end.

At once, Nazli recognized it.

“Oh… how are you?” she asked calmly, in a soft tone. The last time Nazli had spoken to Kashan had been shortly before Javaid’s death — and since that day, echoes of that call still seemed to tremble through her life.

“I’m perfectly fine. I thought I’d share some good news with you first,” Kashan said with a smile in his voice.

“Good news? About what?” Nazli asked, puzzled — she had even forgotten she’d taken an exam.

“You’ve passed — and with excellent marks.”

“What?” Nazli almost shrieked.

“Yes,” Kashan repeated, emphasizing the word.

“Has the result been announced?” she asked in astonishment.

“Of course! I wouldn’t tell you before it was, would I?” Kashan laughed lightly.

Nazli felt a little embarrassed. “But how did you find out my roll number?” she asked, her mind teeming with questions.

“Is that really something you need to know?” Kashan teased.

Nazli didn’t respond — instead she quietly opened the browser and began checking her result.

“Anyway, confirm it yourself — and congratulations once again!” Kashan said before ending the call.

“I haven’t seen it yet, but thank you anyway,” Nazli murmured, her eyes fixed on the laptop screen.

The moment she verified it herself, tears of joy welled up and rolled down her cheeks. The first person she wanted to tell was her mother.

“Alhamdulillah, a thousand thanks to Allah — I’d even vowed to offer nafl prayers if this happened!” Roshan Ara exclaimed joyfully as soon as Nazli called to share the news.

“It’s all because of your prayers, Ammi. I’m so happy today,” Nazli said, smiling through her tears.

Roshan Ara had every reason to be thankful — Nazli had been giving her moments of pride and relief again and again. No sooner had Nazli ended the call than she suddenly saw Kashan standing before her — a bouquet of fresh flowers in his hands. She was startled to see him there.

“You… here?” Nazli asked, eyes wide with surprise. She quickly glanced toward Tazeen’s office door — it was closed. Silently, she thanked God.

“Why, can’t I come here?” Kashan said with calm composure, smiling.

“But how did you even find out that I work here?” Nazli asked, lowering her voice. Just then, a colleague — the accountant girl — passed by, smiled at them, and went on.

“Those who want to find out — always find out. Anyway, forget that. Did you check your result?” Kashan countered.

“Yes, I did,” Nazli answered, but that passing smile from her colleague had unsettled her deeply. Kashan extended the bouquet toward her. “Congratulations!”

Nazli placed the bouquet aside. “Look — this is my office. I don’t want to give the impression that some outsider comes here to hand me flowers,” she said, glancing around nervously. Thankfully, everyone seemed busy with their work.

“Why? Haven’t you told your boss that you passed?” Kashan asked, surprised.

“No, I haven’t.”

“Then I’ll tell her myself.”

Before she could stop him, he started walking toward Tazeen’s office.

“Listen! Please — don’t create a scene here. I have some respect in this office,” Nazli whispered urgently, following him.

“Perhaps you don’t know — I have plenty of respect here too,” Kashan replied with a satisfied smile and, without knocking, strode straight into Tazeen’s office. Nazli stood frozen, staring, certain that her job was finished. A throbbing pain rose behind her temples as she turned and walked back unsteadily to her desk. Moments later, Tazeen and Kashan both came out. Nazli stood up at once when she saw Tazeen — but to her surprise, there was a smile on Tazeen’s face.

“Congratulations, Nazli!”

“Thank you, ma’am.” Nazli stammered, about to say more, but fell silent when Tazeen continued.

“You didn’t even tell me, and…”

“Actually, ma’am, I was just about to,” Nazli cut in hurriedly.

“Well, since she didn’t, I thought I’d tell you myself,” Kashan said, smiling toward Tazeen.

Nazli’s heart burned — she wanted to throw something at him.

“You did well,” Tazeen said with warmth, thanking Kashan.

Nazli was speechless. She knew Tazeen was kind-hearted, but she hadn’t imagined she could be this gentle and cheerful.

“This is Mr. Kashan,” Nazli said quickly, improvising an explanation. “He used to tutor me — he came to give me the good news of my result.”

It seemed the safest way to introduce him — she didn’t want any strange thoughts forming in Tazeen’s mind. Yet she was unaware of a much greater truth.

“Oh! It’s lovely to meet you, Kashan,” Tazeen said with a laugh.

“It’s a pleasure meeting you too,” Kashan smiled, glancing at Nazli but replying to Tazeen. Nazli felt confused — she couldn’t make sense of what was unfolding.

“Well, I think I should leave now. See you again,” Kashan said, smiling as he walked away.

Tazeen turned to Nazli with another smile. “These flowers are so beautiful,” she said, looking at the bouquet.

“Yes.” Nazli replied nervously.

Tazeen smiled once more and went back into her office. As soon as she left, Nazli grabbed her phone and quickly dialled Professor Najeeb’s number. Her cheeks were flushed red with anger.

“Hello sir! It’s Nazli speaking.” In her fury and agitation, she even forgot to greet him properly.

“Aray — how are you, Nazli? What’s wrong? You sound upset,” Professor Najeeb asked, sensing her tone.

“Sir, did you give Kashan my office address?” Nazli asked directly, wasting no time.

“Why? What happened?” the professor replied, dodging the question.

“Sir, that strange man came to my office with flowers because of my result — and then he even went in to tell my boss about it! What must she think now — that I’m making friends with boys? You know very well how I got this job. I have to run my household — such things can put my job at risk!” Nazli burst out, her anger like sharp arrows.

“Nazli, please calm down. There’s no need to worry,” Professor Najeeb said patiently.

“How can I not worry? It’s lucky my boss is kind — she didn’t say anything. Anyone else would have fired me on the spot, asking how a stranger could just walk into their office!”

“That stranger,” Professor Najeeb said quietly, “is your boss’s only son, Nazli.”

“So what if he’s her… wait — what?” Nazli froze mid-sentence.

“Yes. Kashan is the one who arranged your job. Mrs. Tazeen is his mother,” the professor’s voice continued, calm and clear — but Nazli stood motionless.

After that, whatever the professor said, she heard nothing at all.

✦✦✦

“I just don’t understand what suddenly got into you that you decided, out of nowhere, to go off to Kaghan and Naran with your friends,” Anita said in a sulky voice while folding Amir’s shirts and placing them carefully into the suitcase. Amir, fresh from his shower, stood before the mirror, combing his hair with absent-minded precision.

“I’m going on my own expense, not on someone else’s money that I should be worrying about it,” he said carelessly, adjusting his collar.

“I know. It’s that same money you got from selling the shop. Keep it safe. Just a few days from now, we’ll need money for so many expenses for the baby,” Anita replied, her irritation deepening at his carefree tone.

“Don’t worry. I have plenty of money for our child too, and I’m an equal partner with your father in business. I’m not unemployed,” Amir answered sharply, his annoyance now matching hers. He picked up his colognes from the dressing table and began arranging them neatly into the bag.

“You should have taken me with you. You’re taking your friends just to have fun,” Anita muttered, her face drawn with displeasure.

“Oh, so that’s the real grief of Madam Begum,” Amir said lightly, glancing at her with mock amusement.

“Look at yourself — in this condition, do you think you can climb mountains?”

“What do you mean by that? I’m not going to stay in this condition forever. You could have waited a few more days,” Anita snapped, her voice rising.

“A few days later, you’ll have a baby in your arms. Then you won’t be able to climb the valleys of Kaghan and Naran even if you want to,” Amir replied, taking a few items from the wardrobe and placing them into his bag.

“The baby won’t stay in my arms all my life. After a few days, he’ll start walking too,” Anita retorted, still unwilling to let the argument end. She could not fathom Amir’s sudden desire to travel with friends. She wanted to accompany him herself — she had never gone to any hill station with him before, and now, when her delivery was so near, she wanted nothing more than his presence beside her.

“What’s wrong with you? Why can’t you bear to see me happy?” Amir exclaimed in irritation, throwing a towel aside.

“If I go away from this atmosphere for a few days, what difference will it make? It’s my money — I’ll do what I want with it.”

“You could at least save that money. Your mother and sister need it right now — you could give it to them,” Anita said deliberately, knowing her words would sting.

“Don’t try to be my mother right now, understand? Mind your own business. It’s not your father’s money that you’re lecturing me about,” Amir glared at her, his voice biting. More than his words, it was the harshness of his tone that struck Anita. She stared at him, speechless and wounded. At that very moment, Amir’s mobile phone began ringing. He pulled it from his pocket, glanced at the screen, and then, without answering, slipped it back again. Moving briskly, he packed the remaining clothes, zipped the suitcase shut, and after a brief moment of thought, pulled a bundle of cash from his jacket pocket. He tossed it toward Anita.

“Take half of this for yourself, and send the rest to my mother’s house,” he said curtly, slung the strap of his bag over his shoulder, murmured a quick goodbye, and strode out of the room.

The phone began ringing again in his pocket. Outside, Amir walked swiftly down the path and slid into the taxi waiting near the gate. Once seated, he drew out his phone and answered it in a low, quick voice.

“Yes, Saira! I’ve just left the house. I’ll reach the airport in half an hour. Have you reached?” Amir said, and then slipped the phone back into his pocket.

The taxi sped away toward the airport, its headlights slicing through the dim city streets.

✦✦✦

“Professor Najeeb called today. He was telling me that Nazli thought he had given her workplace address to me,” Kashan said as he cut his omelette with a fork, speaking casually to his mother across the breakfast table.

Tazeen sat opposite him, calm and composed, sipping her coffee while occasionally glancing at her phone.

“Oh really? And then?” she asked without lifting her gaze from the screen.

“Then Professor Najeeb told her clearly what my relationship is with you.”

“Oh, so what did Nazli say when she found out that I’m your mother?” Tazeen finally looked up, curious.

“She didn’t call me after that, but according to Professor Najeeb, she was shocked — both surprised and stunned for a while.”

“Well, that’s good. At least now it’ll be easier for her to know you because of me,” Tazeen said, setting her phone aside and lifting her mug again.

“By the way, there’s one thing,” Kashan said thoughtfully.

“What?”

“It’s possible that there’s a lot of strictness in Nazli’s house — that’s why she’s such a different kind of girl. Otherwise, girls these days aren’t like her.”

“Yes, that could be. Partly it’s her nature, and partly her family’s upbringing. That’s why she stays so reserved — and I like girls like that.” Tazeen’s admiration for Nazli was unmistakable.

“If you say so, I’ll go to her house with your proposal,” Tazeen said when Kashan fell silent.

“This should be done before you go to America. You won’t find a prettier or more decent girl than her.”

“That’s exactly what I think too,”

Kashan replied, smiling.

✦✦✦

“All the designs I’ve listed for you — you’ll have to start working on them immediately,” Tazeen said, handing a file to Nazli.

“Of course,” Nazli replied, accepting the file with both hands.

“As for the bills that came in from the other outlets, you can get them signed by me right now if you want,” Tazeen added — just as her phone began ringing loudly.

“Hello! How are you? Oh good, you’re on your way — fine. Yes, yes, I’m at the office, of course you can come,”

Tazeen said cheerfully before ending the call.

“Shall I go now?” Nazli asked politely.

“Wait a bit. A very good friend of mine is coming to meet me — she must be about to arrive. Please keep an eye out, and when she comes, send her to my room,” Tazeen said just as her phone began ringing again. As Tazeen got busy with the call, Nazli quietly stepped out, returning to her desk to resume work on her laptop. She became so absorbed in her task that she completely forgot someone was supposed to visit

Tazeen that morning. After a while, Tazeen emerged from her office and approached Nazli's desk.

"Nazli, I forgot to give you this file."

"Oh, thank you," Nazli said, reaching out to take it.

Just then, the office door opened — and Huma entered. Seeing her, Tazeen rose instantly, her face lighting up.

"I was waiting for you!" Tazeen exclaimed, stepping forward and embracing her warmly. Nazli's eyes lifted instinctively toward the visitor. After the brief hug, Huma stepped back — and froze. Before her, seated at the desk, was Nazli. Their eyes met — and for a moment, the entire room fell into breathless stillness.

"Didn't I tell you you'd have no trouble finding this office? It's quite near your house," Tazeen said, unaware of Huma's hesitation.

"Yes, you're right," Huma replied, tearing her uneasy gaze away from Nazli.

"I was just about to call you, actually — wondering why you were late," Tazeen said with a cheerful smile.

"Yes, well..." Huma fumbled slightly, glancing awkwardly toward her.

"Come, let's sit," Tazeen said, walking toward her office cabin. Huma followed behind, her steps hesitant and heavy. Both women disappeared inside, but in Nazli's veins, the blood seemed to stop flowing. Her face drained of colour. She knew Huma would inevitably speak about her past — and once she did, Tazeen's opinion of her would never remain the same. The past itself no longer mattered — but what might be said now could cost her everything she had built.

Her job.

Her dignity.

Her fragile peace.

Anxiously, she began rubbing her palms together, staring blankly at the computer screen that blurred before her eyes.

"What's wrong, Miss Nazli? You look upset," one of the salesgirls asked, placing a stack of bills on her desk.

Nazli blinked, startled out of her daze.

“Are you feeling unwell?” the girl asked again when Nazli didn’t reply.

“No, nothing,” Nazli said quickly, forcing a faint smile.

She did not even register what else the girl said afterward. Her eyes remained fixed on Tazeen’s office door. Every instinct within her whispered the same thing — that something terrible was about to happen. When the intercom bell rang, Nazli jumped slightly. Her hands trembled as she reached for the receiver. She had already decided she would face whatever came. Before she could even say hello, Tazeen’s gentle voice came through the line.

“Nazli, please bring me the new outfit catalogue,” Tazeen said with her usual calm and warmth.

“Yes, sure,” Nazli answered softly and hung up.

“I was expecting you to drop by my house,” Tazeen said, putting aside her laptop and phone so she could speak comfortably.

“Yes, I would have, but I went to Bangkok for a few days — just came back recently,” Huma said, unintentionally revealing more than she wished.

“Bangkok? For a vacation?” Tazeen asked, curious but casual.

“Yes, something like that. Anyway, tell me, what’s new? I thought I’d do some shopping today,” Huma said quickly, trying to change the subject.

“Shopping so early in the morning?” Tazeen said with a smile.

“Anyway, what will you have — coffee or a drink?”

“Order coffee,” Huma replied, glancing absently around the office.

“Nazli, please send coffee through the tea boy, and bring me those catalogues as well,” Tazeen said into the intercom. The moment Huma heard Nazli’s name, her head turned sharply.

“Yes, I was just bringing them,” Nazli’s voice replied from the other end.

She hung up, gathered the catalo’s in her arms, and walked toward the office cabin.

“This girl works in your office?” Huma asked suddenly, her voice taut.

“Which girl?” Tazeen looked puzzled. Just then, the door opened and Nazli entered.

Huma froze mid-sentence, but within seconds composed herself and spoke again — this time deliberately.

“I’m getting my son Zain married very soon. Right now, I’m considering a few options,” Huma said, fixing her gaze on Tazeen.

“Oh wow, that’s wonderful!” Tazeen exclaimed warmly — while Nazli’s face turned pale as chalk.

“Well, wherever I arrange the marriage, I’ll at least make sure the girl’s family background matches ours,” Huma said with a thin edge of sarcasm, which went completely unnoticed by Tazeen.

“Yes, family is very important, Huma — you’re absolutely right. Even if they’re not equal financially, they should at least be respectable people,” Tazeen agreed pleasantly.

Nazli silently handed over the catalogues. Tazeen thanked her and placed them neatly on her desk.

Without looking in Huma’s direction, Nazli turned and walked quietly out of the room.

“How could you hire that girl in your office, Tazeen?”

Huma’s sudden question startled her friend — and just beyond the door, Nazli froze. Huma’s words sliced through the air like knives. Nazli stayed there, still as stone, listening.

“Which girl?” Tazeen asked, puzzled.

“The one who just came in — Nazli,” Huma replied, her tone dripping with contempt.

“Why? What do you mean?” Tazeen frowned, irritation surfacing.

“I know that girl very well,” Huma said coldly.

“Oh? How?” Tazeen asked, her patience thinning.

“She was involved with my son — a girl of extremely loose character. She lured Zain to an apartment — had I not arrived in time, God knows what would have happened,” Huma declared, every word a deliberate act of destruction. You shouldn’t keep her here — fire her immediately.”

Nazli’s blood surged violently through her veins. Until that moment, fear had gripped her — but now, something inside her shattered completely. In a single instant, Huma had destroyed everything. Tazeen and Huma had been friends for years; Tazeen would surely believe her. No matter how Nazli tried to explain, her image would never again be the same. And what was there to explain? How long could one go on justifying

oneself — insisting that nothing between her and Zain had ever crossed the boundaries of decency? One thing was certain now: Tazeen would dismiss her from the office. A storm of thoughts roared through Nazli's mind.

"You have a son too — he must visit here sometimes. Who knows, she might start following him next," Huma added cruelly, sealing Nazli's fate.

Nazli could bear no more. This place was no longer hers. She walked swiftly to her desk, picked up her handbag, and left the office without a word. A few people saw her leaving in haste, but she gave no one a chance to question her. She stood at the bus stop for a long while. Buses came and went for her route, but lost in thought, she neither saw nor heard anything.

With tired, dragging steps, she finally reached home and knocked softly on the door. After waiting a few moments and seeing no one come, she pressed the doorbell.

"Oh! It's you — how come you've returned so early today? Are you feeling alright?" Roshan Ara opened the door, her face lined with surprise and worry.

"Yes, just... we got off early today," Nazli replied shortly and moved toward her room.

Puzzled by her strange tone, Roshan Ara followed her inside.

"Why did you get off early? The city's situation is fine, isn't it?" she asked anxiously.

"The city's situation is fine," Nazli replied, her voice oddly flat. At that moment, she had no desire to speak.

"Then what?" Roshan Ara persisted, her mother's concern unrelenting.

"Then that I have a bit of a headache. I'll be fine after resting for a while," Nazli said, sitting on the bed and setting her handbag aside.

"That's what I've been asking all along — whether you're unwell. But you wouldn't tell me anything. Take some medicine, or at least have some tea." Roshan Ara's motherly instincts poured out in a stream of anxious advice.

"I just want to sleep for a while — then I'll be fine," Nazli murmured, closing her eyes.

"Alright then, go to sleep. Have tea when you wake up." Seeing her daughter's eyes shut, Roshan Ara quietly stepped out of the room.

As soon as she left, Nazli opened her eyes again. She could think only of one thing — what would Tazeen's attitude be now, after hearing Huma's poisonous words? By

evening, when Nazli still hadn't emerged from her room, Roshan Ara entered again after the Maghrib prayer.

"What's the matter with you? If you're not feeling well, go see a doctor. You have to go to the office tomorrow too," Roshan Ara said with concern.

"I'm not going anywhere now, Ammi. I've left my job." Nazli spoke quietly, but with a strange calm — as though her decision had already been made within her heart.

"What do you mean? Why leave your job?" Roshan Ara looked utterly bewildered.

"I'll look for another job now." Nazli's tone was steady, though her eyes betrayed fatigue.

"What actually happened? You always praised your madam — what's her name — yes, Mrs. Tazeen!" Roshan Ara tried to connect the dots.

"Yes, she's very kind. I didn't quit because of her," Nazli said while gathering her books from the table.

She couldn't bring herself to meet her mother's eyes.

"Then because of whom are you leaving?" Roshan Ara asked, trying to understand.

"Because of myself," Nazli replied softly.

"What do you mean? I don't understand. My child, our situation was just beginning to improve.

Your job covered so many expenses. I know you must think I'm being selfish — I too never wanted you to have to go out and work — but..." Roshan Ara's voice faltered, searching for words.

Every month she struggled to balance the household's needs. She never wished to stretch her hand before anyone again.

"I understand, Ammi. Believe me — if I don't resign myself, they'll dismiss me. It's better I quit on my own."

"But, child, what happened that was so serious?" Ordinarily, such news would have sent Roshan Ara into panic, but after enduring years of hardship, she had learned to steady her heart. She had watched Nazli's strength closely. She trusted her daughter more than her own son — for Nazli had carried this home on her shoulders. Time and adversity had changed them all — even Roshan Ara herself.

“Ammi, please don’t ask me anything. I can’t explain it to you. Believe me, if I could keep working there, I would have till my last breath — but isn’t it better that before someone removes me, I resign myself? Just pray that I find another job soon.” Roshan Ara studied her daughter’s face carefully, but found no expression that could unravel the truth.

“I have only prayers left — and I never stop praying,” Roshan Ara said softly, then turned and walked quietly out of the room. She could not scold her grown daughter for leaving work. She saw in Nazli a weight far too heavy for her age — a weight her son should have borne. She could not imagine spending the rest of her life dependent on her daughters’ earnings. Yet time and fate had taught her that life obeys no human formula. She had failed to make her son her own. All her life, she had feared her daughter-in-law would take him away — and because of that fear, she had always disliked the girl. But despite all her worries, it was her own son who had abandoned everything and left her alone in her grief. Now, she no longer blamed her daughter-in-law.

Nazli lay awake deep into the night, her mind adrift in the tumult of her life. A thousand voices echoed in her ears — each overlapping the other, each dragging her back toward the pain she longed to forget.

“Ask her! Ask her yourself! She will tell you of her own misdeeds!” Amir’s furious voice seemed to ring again through the room.

“Aren’t you ashamed of yourself, doing all this? You’ve all seen now! You used to taunt me day and night to get sisters like her married off!”

Then came her mother’s voice — sharper, heavier than ever.

“Nazli, what have you done! You’ve shown the same shamelessness for which I always cursed Amir’s wife!”

The whole scene began to replay before her eyes — the one that had ended with her father’s death. Her father’s tear-streaked face rose vividly before her, and then vanished — replaced by Huma’s cruel voice in her ears:

“She’s a girl of extremely loose character! She lured Zain to the apartment — had I not arrived in time, who knows what might have happened!”

Nazli’s eyes flew open, and her heart clenched with unbearable pain. Just then, Ameen entered the room, snapping her out of the whirlpool of thoughts. As always, he sat beside her and began chatting about the shop’s affairs. He too now seemed older than his years. Whether it was Ameen’s diligence or Allah’s unseen grace,

Javaid's shop had begun to prosper again. Every day, Nazli and Ameen searched for new designs — through the internet, foreign magazines, and interior catalogues. Ameen often bought those imported magazines from a small second-hand book stall. Nazli herself would call Jameel Bhai to explain the designs in detail, leaving it to him to have the craftsmen build accordingly. Soon, in the entire market, their shop's furniture became distinctive and admired. Nazli wished that one day they might afford a better location, but perhaps that time had not yet come. Still, their earnings were now enough for Roshan Ara and her children to sustain the month with dignity. Her sister Sharmeen managed her education through home tuitions, and with Nazli's income, the household had begun to breathe again. After talking for a long while, Ameen finally fell silent, watching Nazli closely.

"Today you seem very sad to me. You're not talking like you usually do." He asked softly, concerned.

"There's simply nothing to talk about today."

"You know," he continued thoughtfully, "today Jameel Bhai was telling me there's a Hadith:

When Allah loves someone, He tells Angel Jibreel (peace be upon him), and Jibreel too loves that person. Then Jibreel announces to all the angels, 'Allah loves this person, so you too must love him.' And so, all in the heavens begin to love him, and people on earth love him too — and he becomes successful. Does this really happen?"

Nazli remained silent for a long moment. It felt as if that Hadith had been sent down for her alone — to make her understand why disgrace had followed her so relentlessly.

"If it's a Hadith, then surely it must be true — it must be so," she said softly.

"But when Allah is displeased with someone," Ameen added, "then no one likes that person. Wherever he goes, he carries with him a basket full of hatred. That's why one should never do anything that displeases Allah."

Moisture welled in Nazli's eyes. Turning to her side, she hid her face in the pillow, pretending to sleep. Tears slipped silently and soaked deep into the fabric beneath her cheek.

✦✦✦

After Huma left, Tazeen immediately stepped out of her office — but Nazli was nowhere to be seen. She called her through the intercom, but when no one answered, she turned at once to the other staff members.

“She left quite a while ago,” the accountant replied.

“Oh, I see. Did she say anything before leaving?” Tazeen asked, frowning slightly.

By now, she had already guessed\ that Nazli must have overheard Huma’s words.

“No, she didn’t say anything — but she did look worried,” the accountant said.

“Alright then, fine. I’ll call her on her mobile,” Tazeen replied, hanging up the phone.

She sat back in her chair for a few seconds, thinking. Then, after a deep breath, she decided it wasn’t wise to call yet. This was a matter that needed to be settled face to face. She would wait until tomorrow.

✦✦✦

Huma entered the TV lounge in haste and froze when she saw Afzal already sitting there.

“When did you come? You’re feeling alright, aren’t you?” Huma asked in surprise after greeting him.

“Yes, what could be wrong with me? I have a meeting in the evening, so I thought I’d freshen up at home first. Where are you coming from?” Afzal asked, glancing briefly from the TV.

“I went shopping. Remember I told you about Tazeen? I went to her office today — but who knew my blood pressure would shoot up there!” Huma said irritably, tossing her handbag aside.

She set the shopping bags on the table and sank into the sofa with an exasperated sigh.

“Why? What happened?” Afzal asked, only half-interested.

Huma hesitated for a moment, wondering whether she should even bring up Nazli — but when Afzal turned to look at her, she blurted it out.

“Nazli — that girl — she works there!”

“Nazli who?” Afzal’s tone was blank; the name meant little to him.

“The same girl — because of whom there was so much trouble between me and Zain. The one who went with him to that apartment!” Huma said sharply.

“Oh… so?” Afzal replied calmly, his eyes still fixed on the screen.

“So what — just seeing her there made me furious! She was sitting there comfortably.”

“You mean she shouldn’t have been there?” Afzal asked with dry irony.

“Of course not!” Huma snapped.

“Why?” Afzal’s tone stayed cool, though he knew perfectly well what she meant. He wanted her to hear her own absurdity.

“You’re asking as if you don’t know anything! Don’t you remember what kind of girl she is?”

“What kind of girl is she?” he asked, unmoved.

“The kind who trapped my son, doing God knows what at that age!”

“And what exactly did you see her doing?” Afzal’s question cut sharply through the air.

“It doesn’t need to be seen. Going alone to an apartment with Zain is proof enough of all her acts!”

“Your son was in that apartment too — what does that prove?”

“I don’t need to prove anything. I know these poor middle-class girls very well. That’s why I warned Tazeen to be careful of her.”

Afzal turned his head sharply. “You did what?”

“I told her to be careful,” Huma replied, as though it were nothing.

“You told that poor girl’s boss that she was of loose character?” Afzal’s voice rose, his composure cracking.

“What wrong did I do? Tazeen has a grown-up son who comes there. If my friend lands in trouble someday, I warned her for her own good.”

“What exactly did you say?” Afzal’s voice hardened.

“I just told her to be careful.”

“Say what you really said. I know you wouldn’t have stopped at that.”

“I don’t understand why you and your son are both so interested in that ordinary girl! Just mention her name, and you both start arguing with me!” Huma flared, deflecting.

Afzal pressed a hand to his forehead. “How would I know that girl? Everything I’ve ever heard is from your mouth. I’ve never even seen her.”

“Then believe what I’m telling you. She’s a cunning girl of the first order. God knows what she said to trap Zain! It’s because of her that he kept lying to me. Had I not reached the apartment in time, who knows what would have happened! That’s why I told Tazeen to fire her immediately. I told her everything. She was shocked — didn’t say much, but she was clearly stunned.” Huma said breathlessly.

“You didn’t tell Tazeen where your own son is these days?” Afzal asked coldly.

“Why would I, when she didn’t ask?”

“She didn’t ask about that girl either — yet you still found it your duty to destroy her image and her future.”

“I did what I did for Tazeen’s good.”

“No — you did it out of your baseless hatred, fear, and jealousy.”

“Hatred, maybe — but why fear or jealousy? And that too of that girl?”

“It was fear that birthed your hatred — the fear of seeing your son love someone you disapproved of, the fear of him marrying her and forgetting you because of her. Those fears grew into hatred — and that hatred became a tall tree bearing only the poisonous leaves of jealousy.”

Afzal’s words struck like blows.

“Your son is where he is today not because of that girl — but because of his own habits and arrogance. That, too, you should have told Tazeen.” Huma’s chest tightened; she flushed with anger.

“Do I look insane to you, to go around telling people of my son’s misfortune? You know it was proven in the Bangkok court that Zain was not a drug addict — that it was his friend’s foolishness that trapped him! He was deceived — that’s why he’s where he is!”

“Maybe your son deceived that girl too — maybe he lured her there — and you’ve been beating the drum of her disgrace ever since. Understand this, Huma —even if she went there willingly, in the society you live in, a boy and girl meeting privately neither proves anything nor is it rare. So why did you make such an uproar about it?”

“To free Zain from that foolish girl!” Huma shot back bitterly.

“Well, he’s long freed — so now you should free her too. Look at the result of your pride and arrogance — where is Zain today?”

Afzal’s words hit like stones. Something in his tone shook Huma to the core. Was she truly to blame for Zain’s ruin? Or was Zain himself responsible? Or had that girl’s curse fallen upon them both? And if that curse had already taken root — what new calamity might follow now? A storm of questions raged in her mind. Huma was not deeply religious, but the fear of God still flickered faintly in her heart. Afzal’s words haunted her — and for the first time in years, she felt the ache of genuine remorse.

✦✦✦

The next morning, Nazli rose as usual. Each day she prepared breakfast for everyone, then left for work — but today she had nowhere to go. She waited for Tazeen to reach the office so she could call and inform her of her intention to resign. Yet no matter how many times she dialled the number, she could not reach her.

“Well, if she’s in a meeting, please tell her that I’ll come in a day or two to submit my resignation.” Nazli told the HR coordinator on the other end, then hung up. After ending the call, she kept glancing at her phone, half-expecting a return call from the office — but none came that day. The following morning, as she was getting ready to go in person to deliver her resignation letter, the doorbell rang.

“Yes, Nazli is home,” she heard her mother’s voice at the door, speaking to someone.

Nazli paused, surprised. Who could be visiting her at this hour? She was in no mood for guests; she had to drop off her CV at a few places that day. Stepping out of her room, she saw that Roshan Ara had already taken the guest into the drawing room. She was still wondering who it might be when her mother came quickly toward her.

“Your madam from the office — Mrs Tazeen — is here!” Roshan Ara said softly.

“Madam Tazeen? At our house?” Nazli froze, uncertain how to react. Along with surprise, a trace of fear entered her voice. Why had she come all the way to their home?

“Go meet her now. I’ll bring tea.” With that, Roshan Ara disappeared toward the kitchen.

Clenching her fists to steady herself, Nazli walked toward the drawing room.

The air there was scented with Tazeen's familiar, delicate perfume. Tazeen was standing, looking around casually at the room's modest décor. When Nazli entered, Tazeen rose to greet her. After the formal salutations, Tazeen embraced her — and only then did Nazli feel a fragile sense of relief.

"What happened to you all of a sudden? And what's this talk about resigning?" Tazeen asked, studying her face carefully. Her tone was gentle.

"I thought before you dismissed me, I should resign myself," Nazli replied, moistening her dry lips.

"Why would I do that? And even if I did, I'd at least settle your dues first. I don't understand what you mean," Tazeen said, feigning ignorance — though she understood perfectly well.

"Because you've learned everything about me. I thought you wouldn't want me to work for you anymore," Nazli said, avoiding her gaze.

"And I know that all that 'everything' isn't true," Tazeen replied immediately.

Nazli remained silent.

"I want to hear the truth from you. Because I trust your words more than Huma's — trust me." Tazeen placed her hand gently over Nazli's.

"It's a long story," Nazli murmured.

"I know. And I don't want you to tell me everything here in the drawing room — your mother is present too," Tazeen said softly.

"Yes." Nazli understood her meaning.

"I've come to take you with me. We'll go somewhere quiet and talk. In the meantime, I'll have your mother's tea," Tazeen said with a warm smile.

Nazli went to get ready. While she was gone, Tazeen looked around again. On a side table, a framed photograph caught her eye — Javaid's portrait. She instantly understood it was Nazli's late father. When Roshan Ara arrived with the tea tray, Tazeen spoke with her gently, her conversation warm and respectful. When Nazli returned, Tazeen took her along in her car to a restaurant by the sea. The table they chose faced a vast glass window through which the ocean stretched endlessly — waves rising and falling against the shore. Encouraged by Tazeen's calm presence,

Nazli narrated her life story from beginning to end. In return, Tazeen hid nothing of her own past either. Both women's eyes grew moist as they spoke.

"I've been both a good girl and a bad one. I truly loved Zain — that's the only good thing I see in myself. How bad I was — Zain and everyone around me made me realize it," Nazli said, wiping her tears.

Tazeen listened silently.

"Zain moved forward in life so easily, and I... I took all the filth upon myself and turned into a spectacle. All the blame fell on me. I could never move forward again." Nazli fell silent.

"Nazli, now that we've both told each other our stories, you can see there isn't much difference between us," Tazeen sighed deeply.

"You faced one breakup in your life — I faced another in mine. The reasons were different, but both of us suffered pain and humiliation in the same way." She paused.

"But the way we handled it was different. You harmed yourself a great deal, while I learned from my first wound and worked hard — saving both my life and my son's."

"Now I feel I'm not a good girl at all, because..." Before Nazli could finish, Tazeen interrupted gently.

"You're not just good — you're very good. The bad one is the man who deceived you and then turned away. Sometimes, Nazli, the breaking of a relationship is the best thing that can happen."

Tazeen's last words lingered in the air.

"I can't say that I still love Zain, but whenever I hear his name, all the wounds of humiliation reopen," Nazli whispered, gazing at the sea.

"You must forget everything now and think about your future. Life doesn't stay the same forever — believe me. My life itself is proof before you."

Nazli's respect for Tazeen deepened further. Before her sat a living example — a woman who had walked harsher roads and still believed in smiling. They sat a while longer, finishing their ice cream, talking quietly. Then Tazeen dropped Nazli home. She did not mention Kashan at all. She wanted her concern for Nazli to appear pure and selfless — not as though she acted for her son's sake. In truth, she genuinely cared for the girl and did not want her to destroy herself over Huma's foolish words.

From the next day, Nazli resumed coming to the office regularly, immersed in her work as before. Tazeen never again spoke of that incident. Days passed after their meeting. After much thought, Tazeen finally decided she would speak to Kashan about Nazli.

✦✦✦

Kashan, meanwhile, was busy preparing for his test — only after passing it would he be allowed to begin his residency in America. Seeing his preoccupation, Tazeen postponed the matter for now.

“I don’t think I should go to Nazli’s house with a proposal,” she said one evening as they were returning home from a dinner.

“Why? What’s wrong?” Kashan asked, surprised.

“I think you should speak to her yourself first,” Tazeen said thoughtfully.

“But why are you saying that?” Kashan sounded slightly anxious.

“Kashan, it’s possible she may have her own thoughts — maybe she’s not ready for marriage yet. I mean, anything is possible,” Tazeen shared her concern.

“What makes you think she might feel that way?” Kashan asked, looking out of the car window.

“It’s just that I think you should talk to her yourself and learn her opinion. If I ask, she might see me as her boss and not speak openly. And I don’t want her to feel pressured in any way regarding you,” Tazeen said gently.

“You don’t mean she’s interested in someone else, do you?” Kashan asked bluntly.

“Not at all! She’s certainly a very good girl. I’ll always wish for you to marry her. You told me long ago that she’s very traditional in her thinking — and now, after all this time, I can see she’s quite different from other girls. If it were any other girl, I’d be sure she wouldn’t refuse your proposal — but Nazli is different,” Tazeen said quietly.

“Alright then, if that’s the case, I’ll meet her and let you know.” Kashan understood her point completely. He found nothing wrong in proposing to Nazli himself. He loved her sincerely, but his love — like Nazli’s nature — was rooted in purity and restraint. That was why, until now, he had never tried to chase her or impose his feelings upon her.

Nazli was busy with her usual office work when the phone on her desk began to ring. She picked it up — unaware that it was Kashan on the other end. Even if she had known, she no longer felt the irritation or unease that she once did toward him.

“How are you?” Kashan asked after the customary exchange of greetings.

“I am perfectly fine, all praise to Allah. How are you?” Nazli replied in her usual composed tone.

“I want to meet you to talk about something. Next week, I have a flight to America — my residency is about to begin,” Kashan said.

“If you don’t mind, may I ask what it is you wish to meet about?” Nazli’s tone was soft, yet her words carried the same sense of principle as always.

Without a clear purpose, she was never willing to meet anyone.

“That I can only tell you in person. Can you meet me tomorrow — anytime?” Kashan avoided giving details over the phone.

“I have to go to the university tomorrow to submit my admission form for graduation. It will be very difficult tomorrow,” Nazli said apologetically.

“Graduation? That’s wonderful. Well then, if not tomorrow, we can meet the day after. No issue from my side.”

“Alright then, you can come to the office. After all, it’s your own office,” Nazli said with a faint smile.

“If it were the office, I wouldn’t be calling you on the office number insisting to meet,” Kashan replied, sounding slightly frustrated.

Nazli did not notice his irritation. After a brief pause, she said, “Fine then. Come to the café near the office. Have coffee — it’s on me.”

After thinking for a moment, she chose a simple, safe public place. Kashan ignored her caution completely and said he would be there at the appointed time before hanging up. Nazli sat for a moment in silence. She could not quite understand the purpose of this meeting. After pondering briefly, she immersed herself again in work. She had enough on her mind already. At present, her focus lay entirely on her studies — and Tazeen had promised to support her in every possible way.

✦✦✦

Amir had, for several months now, been carrying on an extra-marital affair with a woman named Saira. Anita had no idea. He had gone to Kaghan and Naran not with a friend, but with Saira herself. Saira was a twenty-six-year-old divorcée who had met Amir by chance at a factory where she worked as a telephone operator. She was not particularly beautiful in features, but her boldness and coquettish charm had helped her get close to Amir very quickly. Amir, handsome and vain, had always been the kind of man who drew attention. He could not escape Saira's hungry eyes. Saira had long been known for flirting with the owner of her previous factory to siphon off money. She would never have left that job had the owner's wife not caught her red-handed indulging in pleasure within the factory itself. Disgraced and thrown out, she had remained jobless for quite some time. After months of struggle, she finally secured a position in the administration department of her current workplace as a telephone operator. Heavy makeup and bright clothing were her daily armour. Flirting with every man she met and taking an excessive interest in their lives were part of her habits. She never had to rely on buses or rickshaws — there was always some man ready to give her a lift home. Though she always made sure to drape an abaya when leaving the house or returning.

"Our family is very conservative, you see," Saira had said during their first meeting when Amir asked about her background.

"Who all are there in your family?" Amir had asked casually.

"Just me, my younger brother, and my aunt. My aunt's husband lives in Muscat — he sends her money from there," Saira had replied, taking a small mirror from her purse to fix her lipstick.

"Your aunt doesn't have any children?" Amir asked, intrigued by the odd household setup.

"Oh no! That's why she keeps me and my younger brother with her. We were both very small when our parents died in a car accident," Saira said, her tone suddenly sad.

Amir felt a flicker of pity. "Oh, I'm sorry to hear that," he said softly, deciding not to pry further.

Somewhere during that casual conversation, the two had become friends — and soon, very close friends — without either realizing how it happened. If Saira was drawn to Amir's charm, Amir was enthralled by her brazen, uninhibited manner. Anita was his modest, veiled wife — Saira, a temptress out of a film, was his means of escape. She was a lover with no desire to marry him. She wanted only his company

and his money. That was why Amir felt both free and safe with her — Saira had long told him never to even mistakenly think of marrying her. Her idea of marriage was something else entirely. She was already receiving from Amir everything she wanted. For that very purpose, the two had planned their trip to Naran and Kaghan — a place far from all worries, where they could simply enjoy themselves.

“So, will you just keep talking, or are you going to take me somewhere for a nice meal too?” After talking for a while, Saira always grew hungry.

They were sitting on a bench in a deserted park by evening. “By the way, you promised to gift me a mobile this week. I swear, it’s so annoying to call you from Aunt Shaista’s phone — she suspects me so much! Now what do I tell her — that you and I are just friends?” Saira teased him, tracing her fingers lightly over the watch on his wrist. Amir smiled. He liked the feel of her wandering fingers.

“We’re friends, yes — but tell her we’re very close friends,” he said, covering her hand with his.

“Oh God! There you go again. Shame on you — you have a wife too, remember?” Saira said, feigning outrage.

“She’s my wife, and you’re my beloved,” Amir replied instantly, tightening his grip on her hand.

“In today’s world, every beloved wants to become a wife, and every wife — well, she’s always been someone’s beloved. If not her husband’s, then someone else’s,” Saira said, laughing darkly — as if making all women sound like herself.

“Anita and I had a love marriage too, but with time, we grew distant. Now love seems far behind, and everywhere there are only problems,” Amir said, though he disliked hearing Anita’s name from Saira’s lips.

“You’ve got money now, haven’t you? You even sold the shop — at least think of me now,” Saira teased.

“You’ll get the mobile by the end of the week,” Amir promised.

“Oh, how much you love me — truly!” Saira said, clasping his hand between hers.

Since the day Fareeda had whispered into Anita’s ear about Amir’s suspicious phone calls, Anita had been uneasy. She had never given much weight to Fareeda’s gossip before, but Amir’s growing indifference was now gnawing at her heart. She was waiting to give birth to her first child. For three years after marriage, she and Amir had remained childless — and now, with the arrival of their baby so near, Amir’s coldness

had become a deep wound. He had gone off to Kaghan and Naran, and Anita had no idea that her husband was sharing those days with another woman. After selling his shop, Amir had begun spending freely. He had invested part of it into his father-in-law Ikram's business — which, for the moment, had kept everyone silent.

Following Amir's instructions, Anita decided to deliver the envelope of cash he had given her to Roshan Ara.

"In this condition, what's the need for you to go yourself? Call Nazli or Ameen and send it through them. Nazli goes to work anyway — if she comes over, the sky won't fall," Fareeda advised, thinking it wise to offer her opinion.

"I go to the doctor alone all the time, don't I? Amir is either with me or he isn't — and my parents aren't here. If I go myself, what difference does it make?" Anita replied, unwilling to take advice even when it was in her own interest.

"Yes, indeed — your husband leaves early morning and returns late at night. Ikram tells me Amir leaves the factory by evening anyway," Fareeda added, fanning the spark of suspicion already alive in Anita's heart.

"On holidays, Amir takes me himself to the doctor. Besides, the clinic isn't far. I always take a taxi there. I'll go to Amir's mother's house by taxi today too," Anita said irritably, snapping her purse shut.

"You might have to go to the hospital any day now. I can't understand why Amir felt the need to go off traveling at such a time," Fareeda said, throwing one last stone as Anita left.

Without replying, Anita walked toward the gate. When she reached Roshan Ara's house, Nazli happened to be home too. Seeing Anita, she instinctively ran forward and embraced her warmly. Instead of wandering about, Anita went straight to Roshan Ara's room.

"How are you, Anita Bhabhi? Please, sit down," Nazli said quickly, clearing a space for her on the sofa cluttered with things.

Roshan Ara sat silently, observing. She could not understand the reason for Anita's sudden visit.

"I'm fine — and how are you, Ammi?" Anita asked when she saw Roshan Ara sitting quiet.

"By God's grace," Roshan Ara replied in a tone stripped of expression.

“Please sit, Anita Bhabhi,” Nazli urged again.

Anita sat down and took an envelope from her purse, extending it toward Roshan Ara.

“Ammi, Amir sent this money for you,” she said nervously.

She knew Roshan Ara could begin cursing her and Amir at any moment — that had always been her way — but to Anita’s surprise, Roshan Ara remained calm, though serious.

“What are these for?” Roshan Ara asked, glancing at the envelope.

“For household expenses,” Anita replied, moistening her lips.

“I don’t want it. Tell him to keep it for himself,” Roshan Ara said flatly, refusing even to touch the envelope.

Anita stared at her in silence, unsure what to say.

“He sent this money because he thought you might be in some difficulty,” she said hesitantly after a pause.

“There is difficulty — but this money from Brother Amir cannot heal all our wounds,” Nazli said softly.

“Actually, Amir sold the shop without consulting us. Had he asked me, I’d never have let him make that decision,” Anita added quietly.

Roshan Ara and Nazli remained silent.

“Well, what’s done is done. Now we’ll work hard ourselves and rebuild the shop. You just pray for us,” Nazli sighed after a moment.

A strange silence filled the room. Roshan Ara stared blankly at the wall ahead. Seeing Anita reminded her even more sharply of Amir’s neglect and indifference.

“Ammi, you’re so quiet today. It doesn’t feel right. Even if you don’t speak kindly to me, say something — in anger, or even hatred,” Anita’s voice trembled. She was on the verge of tears. She too was deeply unhappy, and looking at Roshan Ara made her feel somehow responsible.

“I used to hate you because I thought you’d stolen my son from me — but then I realized that if he hadn’t been so heartless, no one could have stolen him away,” Roshan Ara said, tears gathering in her eyes.

Anita came and sat beside her. She wanted to cry and tell her how unhappy she herself was. She hadn't seen Amir's affair with her own eyes, but her heart kept warning her that something was terribly wrong — that some dreadful truth was about to reveal itself.

"Now you're about to become a mother. When your child is born, you'll understand my pain," Roshan Ara said quietly.

"I can understand even now, Ammi. Believe me, I've always tried to make Amir understand, but he never listens to me. I think I'm being punished for breaking your heart and marrying him," Anita wept openly now.

"That's why I've stopped saying anything to Amir too. I've left him to his own fate," Roshan Ara said, wiping her tears.

Anita returned home with the envelope of money still in her hand. She tried calling Amir's mobile many times, but it remained switched off. She couldn't sleep all night. At dawn, she began calling again — but though the phone kept ringing, Amir did not answer. He even ignored Ikram's call — until Ikram finally reached him to deliver the news:

"Anita has been admitted to the hospital. The doctor says she suffered extreme emotional stress. You must come immediately. The next twenty-four hours are critical for both mother and child." Ikram's voice trembled with worry. He said nothing more and hung up. When Amir received that call, he was sitting in a chairlift, his arms wrapped around Saira's shoulders. At that moment, he felt as though he could throw himself off the mountains.

✦✦✦

"I want to marry you." It was Kashan who sat before Nazli at that moment. For her, the surprise lay not merely in his words, but in the disarming simplicity with which he had set aside their formal "you-sir, me-madam" tone and spoken with such clarity. The two of them were seated in a quiet restaurant, just as they had agreed over the phone.

"I beg your pardon?" Nazli's voice faltered slightly, caught off guard.

"I love you, and I want to marry you — it's a very simple thing," Kashan repeated, this time with calm conviction.

"You've said this to me once before. It's not a new thing for me," Nazli replied, uncertain what to say or how to say it.

"I want your answer," Kashan said seriously, his eyes fixed on hers.

“The fact is… I’m not as good a girl as you think I am,” Nazli said after a pause.

“What flaw do you find in yourself?” Kashan asked plainly.

“My past,” Nazli answered softly.

“Past? What do you mean by that?” Kashan leaned forward slightly, unable to grasp her meaning.

“Look, I know that you’ve done a lot of favours for me. Under the pile of your favours, I feel as if I am sinking into the earth.” Nazli’s words came slowly, hesitantly.

For some reason, sitting there in that restaurant today brought back the painful echo of another time long ago — a time when she had sat before Zain, pleading in much the same way. She was speaking to Kashan, but in her mind, her past began unspooling like a film reel.

“But I’m not talking about any favour,” Kashan said gently, studying the distance in her eyes.

“It’s because of your favours that I must give you a reason for refusing marriage; otherwise, if it were someone else, perhaps I would have…” Nazli stopped midway, words failing her.

“I know — you’d have scolded him, said a few harsh words, and driven him away, right?” Kashan smiled faintly.

“After all, someday you’ll have to marry someone — so why not me?” He looked at her carefully, searching her expression.

Tears welled up in Nazli’s eyes. Kashan let her cry. He wanted her to weep openly, to pour out everything she had been carrying in silence.

“I once loved someone very deeply — but he did not treat me well,” Nazli finally gathered her courage and said.

“So you’ll keep punishing yourself forever for one man’s betrayal?” Kashan’s voice held no surprise.

Nazli did not respond.

“Do you still love him?” Kashan asked seriously.

Nazli flinched as though struck.

“What do you mean?” Her voice trembled, as if someone had seized her shoulders and shaken her.

“I’ve asked a very simple question. Do you still love the man who deceived you and treated you badly?”

“I’ve never really thought about it — so I don’t know,” Nazli whispered, biting her lip.

“That’s exactly the whole problem. You don’t even know whether you still love that person or hate him.” Nazli stiffened slightly at his words. Indeed, she had long since stopped asking herself that question.

“If you still loved him, you wouldn’t have had to think so much to admit it before me; and if you hated him, you wouldn’t still consider yourself a bad girl because of him.” Kashan sat back slightly, one arm resting casually on the table, his tone calm but assured.

Nazli looked at him without blinking.

“Nazli, the first thing you need to understand is this — the man who wronged you — is he still controlling your life? And if yes, then why — for what reason?”

Having said this, Kashan didn’t stay another moment. He rose from his chair, paid the bill quietly, and walked out of the restaurant. Nazli remained seated at the same table, staring blankly ahead.

After a long time, someone had again rendered her speechless. Once, only Zain’s words had left her this way — but back then, she had been young and naïve. Now, Kashan had stunned her in the same manner — but with reason, not cruelty. What did she want, and what did she not want? The time had come for her to decide.

“Nazli, the first thing you need to understand is this — the man who wronged you — does he still control your life? And if yes, then why, for what reason?”

Kashan’s voice echoed again in her mind.

✦✦✦

Anita gave birth to a son. Amir caught the first available flight and reached the hospital. Seeing him arrive so soon greatly comforted Anita. Overjoyed at the birth of his son, Amir distributed sweets among the hospital staff and even among relatives of other patients in neighbouring rooms. There was no limit to his happiness. He himself called Roshan Ara to share the good news, asking her to be ready by evening

so he could bring her to the hospital. No matter how much anger she still carried, Roshan Ara could barely contain her delight at the arrival of her grandson. Ikram and Fareeda were already there with Anita.

“What’s this — you’ve emptied the whole basket of sweets!” Ikram exclaimed from the sofa as Amir entered the room.

“What else! I brought three baskets. I distributed sweets throughout the entire hospital. Just today I spent ten thousand only on sweets!” Amir said cheerfully.

“Amir, what was the need for that? At most you could have given sweets to Anita’s doctor and the nurses. Many relatives still have to come to see the baby,” Fareeda remarked disapprovingly.

“My father told me that when I was born, he too had distributed sweets throughout the hospital. He was very happy at my birth — his very first son — and…”

Javaid’s worried face suddenly flashed before Amir’s eyes. He fell silent mid-sentence. Anita looked toward him. Without another word, Amir turned and left the room. For some reason, his father’s face would not leave his mind.

“Like father, like foolish son,” Ikram muttered sarcastically as Amir walked out.

“Please, Baba, you don’t know. Amir’s father was a very good, decent, noble man. And besides, he has passed away — don’t speak ill of him,” Anita said quietly.

She knew Javaid’s entire nature well — and she knew, too, how his own son had broken him.

“But you should make Amir understand that all this is just wasting money. Tell me — he distributed sweets to the entire hospital!” Ikram scoffed, uninterested in hearing of Javaid’s virtues.

“Let him. It’s his money and his son. You people should only pray that Amir’s son doesn’t grow up to become for Amir what Amir became for his own parents,” Anita said, gazing at her newborn child sleeping peacefully beside her bed. Amir now had his own car too, partly bought with Ikram’s money. That evening, he brought Roshan Ara, Sharmeen, and Ameen to the hospital in it.

Nazli was overjoyed at the birth of her brother’s son — yet she couldn’t bring herself to go to the hospital.

“Do take photos on your mobiles for me,” she reminded Sharmeen and Ameen before they left. Roshan Ara carried with her whatever gifts and sweets she could afford and sat for a long time holding her grandson in her lap.

By nightfall, Amir took everyone back home.

“So this is how you found a reason to visit your mother, Amir. Well, may God bless you,” Roshan Ara said as she stepped out of the car. Amir had no time for his mother — so he said nothing in reply.

✦✦✦

After Kashan’s proposal, Nazli gave him no reply. It wasn’t that she hadn’t thought about it — she simply didn’t want, at that moment, to involve herself in engagement or marriage and burden her mother further. She didn’t want to run from her responsibilities. After remaining silent for two or three days, she decided at least to explain herself to Tazeen.

“Oh wow! What’s this box of sweets for, Nazli?” Seeing the box in Nazli’s hand, Tazeen smiled and asked while quickly putting a few things into her handbag.

“My brother has had a baby boy — my first nephew. The weekend holidays came in between, so I brought sweets today.”

“Mā shā’ Allāh, congratulations!” Tazeen said warmly, placing a small piece of sweet in her mouth.

“And you’ll have to eat a bit more sweets too,” Nazli said, offering another piece.

“Oh? And what for?”

“I’ve submitted my admission form for graduation at the university. Classes will be on weekends,” Nazli informed her proudly.

“Wonderful! That’s very good. That’s exactly what I wanted — that you keep studying. You don’t need to worry about office pressure in this matter.”

“That’s exactly why I’m feeding you sweets,” Nazli said, smiling as she handed her another piece.

Just then, Tazeen’s phone rang. She wiped her hands with a tissue and answered.

“Yes, Kashan, you’ve reached? Alright, I’m coming.”

She put on her sunglasses.

“You’re going somewhere?” Nazli asked.

“Yes, Kashan is leaving for America tomorrow morning. His residency is starting. That’s why we’re going shopping — I wanted to send some things for my brother’s family,” Tazeen said, closing her laptop.

“Once Kashan leaves, he’ll be completely busy for at least three years. Doing specialization isn’t easy. Anyway — okay bye, see you tomorrow.”

She dropped her car keys into her handbag and left the office cabin.

Nazli stood frozen. She had not managed to speak to either Kashan or Tazeen about the proposal. Hearing that Kashan was leaving Pakistan left her with a strange, indescribable feeling. She couldn’t name it, but she knew that in rejecting Kashan’s love, she herself had perhaps done wrong. For the first time in a long while, she realized her faith in love had not truly died — she had merely stopped believing herself worthy of loving or being loved again.

The next day, Tazeen stood at the airport with Kashan to see him off.

“I’m worried about you — you’ll be very lonely without me,” Kashan said, hugging her tightly.

“You don’t need to worry at all. And besides, I’m not alone. Fazal Din and his wife Samina live in the servant quarters. Most of my day passes at the office. Their presence at home for a few hours gives me peace of mind,” Tazeen said affectionately, reassuring him to remain carefree.

“Did you tell Nazli that I’m going to America?” Kashan asked, just as he was about to leave.

“Yes, it came up yesterday in front of her,” Tazeen said simply. She knew Kashan had been waiting for Nazli — but she had left that matter for him to face on his own.

Kashan went to America; his residency had begun. Nazli, meanwhile, became absorbed in her graduation classes, and time seemed to grow wings — days turning into weeks, weeks into months, and months into years. In two years, Kashan came to Pakistan only twice, and even then, he had no contact with Nazli. Nazli, too, never made any attempt to reach out. Every few months, Tazeen travelled to America to visit her son, and each time she returned, she brought some thoughtful gift for Nazli. During this time, Kashan never failed to wish Nazli on her birthday. Nazli always replied with a brief “Thank you.” Whenever Tazeen informed him of Nazli’s exam results, he sent her a congratulatory message — and she would do the same in return.

Through his mother, Kashan remained updated on Nazli's life. He knew she was focusing entirely on her studies and her work. On class days, thanks to Tazeen's generosity, Nazli was allowed to leave the office early to attend university. Thus she completed her graduation with outstanding marks. Soon after, she enrolled in a Master's program. By then, Nazli had become a designer at Tazeen's boutique. During university holidays, Tazeen arranged for her to attend various fashion-designing courses through the office — and owing to her natural gift, Nazli soon emerged as an astonishingly talented designer. In those two years, Tazeen's boutique participated in the Dubai Bridal Week alongside several leading brands and won the "Best Bridal Dress" award. After that, the boutique's fame soared sky-high. Nazli's responsibilities had multiplied, but so had her brilliance. Tazeen often said that Nazli's creativity had given her entire brand a new soul. At Tazeen's insistence, Nazli learned to drive in just a few weeks — and soon she was given a company car. The car made it easier to balance her studies, job, and home. During those days, a marriage proposal came for Sharmeen from a good family, and after consulting Nazli, the engagement was held in a small, graceful ceremony. Ameen was now in his first year of college. Most of the shop's management was left to Jameel Bhai, but Ameen — unlike Amir — never ignored his responsibilities. He went to the shop every weekend and oversaw everything himself.

Amir and Anita's son, Faras, was now three years old. For the first few months, Amir used to bring his son to visit Roshan Ara. After her, Faras was most attached to Nazli. But gradually, Amir stopped bringing him altogether. He had become entangled again in other pursuits. In Anita's life, Amir had left nothing except the burden of raising their child. A few months after Faras's birth, Amir had ended things with Saira — though it made little difference to her. Her doors, as always, remained open. And indeed, after a few months, Amir was once again seen with Saira. Saira even introduced him to another friend of hers — one not very different from herself. Amir sank deeper into indulgence. After seeing a few suspicious calls and messages, Anita confronted him several times. Each time, the quarrel ended either in threats of divorce or Amir vanishing for days. His disagreements with Ikram, too, increased — though Ikram bore them silently, for the sake of his daughter. Amir still worked with him, while Anita spent her days — and sometimes nights — waiting for him to return.

One day, Faras fell ill with a high fever. Anita took him to a nearby doctor. On her way back, she saw Amir herself — driving through the street with another woman beside him. That moment shattered her. The suspicion she had long harboured hardened into certainty. She told everything to Ikram. After that, Amir had no place left in his father-in-law's home. Ikram, furious, threw him out on the spot. And the next day,

when Amir came to the factory to collect his accounts, Ikram had him beaten by the workers and thrown out without a single rupee. Anita's heart had turned to stone.

Amir drifted for days — sometimes sleeping at friends' homes, sometimes with Saira, sometimes with other women like her. No one could bear his poverty or broken pride for long. One by one, everyone turned away. At last, destitution and hunger brought him once again to the threshold of his father's house — the same house he had once left, in the same misery, trusting only in God.

"I'm coming! Who is it?" Roshan Ara called, opening the gate — and there stood Amir, a bag in his hand.

"Amir, my son! Is everything alright? You look very ill. I've been calling you for days. I even asked Anita about you, but you never called back," she said, gazing at him with trembling hands.

"Can I stay in this house?" Amir asked quietly.

Roshan Ara was stunned. That night, Amir ate food cooked by his mother's hands and fell into a deep, dreamless sleep. Perhaps he had not slept for many days. Roshan Ara immediately informed Nazli.

"He looks very sick. I can't understand what's happened. He won't say anything — only that now he'll live here," her voice carried the helpless worry of a mother.

"Ammi, please don't worry. I'll talk to Anita Bhabhi and ask what the matter is," Nazli replied. She knew well that Amir must have done something terrible again. She hung up and returned to her work. She called Anita several times, but Anita did not answer. After a while, Nazli stopped trying. That evening, she went to the university, and upon returning, heard the same account again from her mother. By then, Amir had gone back to sleep. Nazli and Amir had not come face to face. But when she finally reached Anita — what she heard from her lips was beyond belief.

✦✦✦

Kashan had completed his residency and returned to Pakistan. For Tazeen, his return was a matter of deep joy. During all that time, Nazli had cared for her with quiet devotion. When illness had once confined Tazeen to bed, it was Nazli who stayed in her home to nurse her— and in doing so, she had won Tazeen's heart completely. During those days, Tazeen had told Nazli many things about Kashan— how, as a child, he had feared his father, Mohsin; how, at a tender age, he had allowed that fear to take hold of his nerves and silence his will. Never before had Tazeen spoken of these

things in such detail. Reopening those old wounds before Nazli had brought her no regret. She did not know whether she shared all this to draw Nazli closer to Kashan, or whether her affection for Nazli had grown so genuine that she now saw her as one of her own family. It had been only a week since Kashan's return to Pakistan when he thought of delivering a few items sent by his medical college friend Hammad's elder brother. Hammad worked at a private hospital in Karachi. On seeing Kashan, he rose at once and embraced him warmly.

"When did you come, man? You didn't even inform me!" Hammad exclaimed, still holding him.

"Why would I? I had to come see you anyway," Kashan replied with the same affection.

"You did right—otherwise I wouldn't have spared you. Tell me, how were your three years in America?" Hammad asked, releasing him.

"Excellent! Anyway—first of all, here." Kashan handed him a small shopping bag. "This is what your elder brother sent for you." Just then, the intercom rang. Hammad picked up the receiver.

"Hello? Yes, I'm coming," he said after listening briefly.

"Yaar, Kashan—you sit here, don't go. I'll just take a quick round of the operation theatre— fifteen or twenty minutes at most." He lifted his lab coat from the back of the chair.

"Seems like you don't have time for me anymore," Kashan teased, watching his rush.

"Come on, just wait a little, please. Then we'll go out somewhere and talk properly—there's so much to tell you. Don't leave, please wait." Hammad spoke in a pleading tone.

"All right. Instead of sitting cramped in this tiny room of yours, I'll take a short walk in the hospital's waiting area. You'll be back in fifteen minutes anyway, right?" Kashan said with a smile.

"Yes, yes—just fifteen minutes! The whole hospital's yours—go wherever you like." Hammad laughed, slipped into his lab coat, gathered some papers, and hurried out.

Kashan strolled into the corridor. After Hammad disappeared toward the operation theatre, he made his way to the waiting area. Looking around, he took a seat on a nearby sofa, where a few magazines lay scattered on the centre table. He began flipping through them absent-mindedly.

“Sir, Dr. Hammad’s appointment is not available for the next two months,” the receptionist was saying loudly to someone after a long argument. Glancing up from the magazine, Kashan looked toward the reception desk. Standing there was a middle-aged man, holding a walking stick. He appeared to be around fifty-five or sixty.

“Please try to understand—I can’t wait that long. I’m very unwell,” the man said in a weak, pleading voice. That voice sent a sharp tremor through Kashan’s entire being. It was too familiar— his ears recognized it instantly— but his mind refused to trust them.

“I understand, sir, but Dr. Hammad already has many appointments lined up,” the receptionist replied apologetically.

“Can you not let me meet Dr. Hammad? I’ll show him my medical reports,” the man insisted again.

Now Kashan heard that same voice once more— and this time, there was no mistaking it. He knew who it was. Setting the magazine aside, he rose and walked softly forward, trying to glimpse the man’s face, who until then had his back turned toward him. Kashan moved to a place a few steps away where he could see clearly. One glance—and all doubt vanished. The man standing before the receptionist was none other than his father, Mohsin Ali. For a few moments, Kashan could not move. He stood frozen, staring at him. His father now appeared older, weaker, almost fragile.

“For now, Dr. Hammad has gone to the operation theatre. You may please wait for him,” the receptionist said kindly, tired of explaining. Kashan quickly gathered his composure and spoke.

“What’s the matter here?”

The receptionist turned in surprise. “And who are you, sir?”

“I’m a close friend of Dr. Hammad. He asked me to wait in his room while he went to the operation theatre.” The words came from Kashan’s mouth, yet they did not sound like his own. His tone was dry, his mind racing faster than his heartbeat.

“Oh, I see. Actually, this gentleman wants an earlier appointment with Dr. Hammad, but the next two months are already booked.”

“I’ll speak to Dr. Hammad myself. Please give him today’s appointment,” Kashan said, moistening his lips.

“Today’s appointment?” the receptionist repeated, astonished.

“Yes—absolutely.” Kashan’s voice carried quiet authority.

“Please tell me your name and the patient’s name. Is he your relative?” The receptionist’s fingers flew over the keyboard.

Mohsin, watching all this, looked at Kashan in confusion. He still had not recognized him.

“My name is Kashan Mohsin, and the patient’s name is Mohsin Ali. He is my father.”

Hearing those words, Mohsin went pale. The receptionist, stunned, handed Kashan the appointment slip. Kashan extended it toward Mohsin.

“You wait here for a little while. Dr. Hammad is a very good friend of mine— he’ll attend to you today itself.” Mohsin sat down slowly with the help of his stick. His face bore a strange blend of shock and disbelief.

✦✦✦

When Amir opened his eyes, he saw a shining car standing in the courtyard. Surprised, he went toward his mother.

“Whose car is this?” he asked, astonished.

“It’s Nazli’s car—she received it from the office,” Roshan Ara replied.

“No one even told me,” Amir muttered, staring toward it.

“If you had ever come home, I would have told you,” she answered flatly.

“Who drives it?”

“What do you mean, who drives it? She drives it herself.” Roshan Ara adjusted the bedsheet calmly.

“You don’t forbid her? The city’s condition is terrible—she drives around alone, after all, she’s a girl!” Amir’s sudden burst of male pride surfaced.

“Be thankful she’s a girl. Had she been a boy, she would have learned to drive and left her family long ago,” Roshan Ara retorted pointedly.

Amir ignored the jab. “Where is everyone? No one’s met me since last night.”

“They sleep early. All three work hard—and that’s how this house runs.” Roshan Ara’s tone carried quiet reproach.

“And now tell me—what have I been hearing about you?” She had waited all night for him to wake up, and finally came to the real subject.

“What did you hear?” Amir’s eyes narrowed; he knew something unpleasant had reached her ears.

“That Anita saw you roaming with another girl— and that’s why you had to leave the house.” Her eyes met his sharply.

“Who told you all this?” Amir was startled.

“Nazli called Anita. Anita told her everything.”

“What need did Nazli have to do that? And anyway, Anita talks nonsense. I’ll divorce her very soon.” Amir’s voice grew defensive.

“How can you call it nonsense? No woman would level such a charge on her husband without reason.” Roshan Ara’s faith in him had long vanished.

“You should be ashamed. You have a son—two grown sisters. You should have thought of them before doing all this. Go apologize to Anita and think of your child.”

“I did apologize, but Anita and her father refuse to hear a word from me.” Amir ran a weary hand through his hair.

“This is no way to live, Amir. First you left us for Anita— and now, for someone else, you’ve left Anita.” Her words struck deep.

Amir had no answer. He suddenly missed his son, Faris, terribly. Without eating breakfast, he left the house. Roshan Ara watched him go— but this time, she did not try to stop him.

✦✦✦

“Sorry, yaar—I said fifteen to twenty minutes, but it took longer,” Dr. Hammad said as he opened the door. Kashan sat hunched forward, elbows on his knees, face buried in his hands. At the sound of Hammad’s voice, he looked up.

“No problem. Actually, I need a favour from you,” Kashan said, still unsettled.

“Yes, yes—tell me.” Hammad was curious.

“There’s a patient outside. Please attend to him today—right now.” Kashan’s voice carried a strange urgency.

“Does he have an appointment?”

“No—but please see him before anyone else. Please.” Something in his tone made Hammad pause. “Is everything okay? Do you know him?”

“Yes,” Kashan said softly.

“No problem—I’ll inform reception. What’s the patient’s name?”

“Mohsin Ali.” On Kashan’s request, Hammad examined Mohsin first. Kashan sat waiting outside. Hammad took his time with the consultation, listening patiently to every symptom, prescribing carefully, because he sensed the matter was personal. Mohsin too seemed disturbed— but he asked Hammad nothing about Kashan. For Kashan, the past rose in painful clarity. He had last seen his father on the day Mohsin left Tazeen’s house forever. Now, after twenty years, they stood face to face once again. When Hammad and Mohsin emerged, Kashan rose quickly to his feet.

“I’ve completed the check-up—changed some medicines,” Hammad said to Kashan.

“Thank you,” Mohsin said with a faint smile.

“Uncle, such a strong recommendation came for you that I couldn’t possibly refuse! Besides, our dear friend has just returned from his medical residency in America—how could I upset him?” Hammad placed a friendly hand on Kashan’s shoulder.

“Oh, so Kashan is also a doctor?” Mohsin asked in surprise.

“Yes indeed—and a very capable one! Anyway, you both talk. I’ll go to reception and check on the rest of the patients.” Unaware of their bond, Hammad left.

Kashan looked quietly at Mohsin, searching his face for something—anything. But even now, those eyes held no emotion for him.

“You are my son, Kashan?” Mohsin’s voice trembled.

“Yes. Many years ago, you yourself told me that.”

“You’ve grown up—your face has changed completely.” Mohsin reached out a frail hand, brushing Kashan’s cheek.

“A lot of time has passed,” Kashan said simply.

“Come, let’s sit. I can’t stand for long.” They sat down on the nearby sofa.

“You’ve even become a doctor—never told me,” Mohsin said after a pause.

“There’s no need to tell a father. A father is supposed to already know.”

“Which hospital are you working at?”

“For now, I’ve just returned after completing residency in America.”

“I’m glad—you’ve become a capable doctor,” Mohsin said, trying to smile.

“I didn’t become one—my mother made me one.” Kashan’s eyes were distant. Mohsin fell silent.

“You should come to my house sometime. I’d like you to meet my family.” Kashan said nothing.

“You have two brothers and a sister. But unlike you, they aren’t educated. They fell far behind in their studies.”

“Really? Strange. They were always under your supervision—and still?” Kashan’s tone wasn’t mocking, yet it pierced.

“Yes, perhaps it was written that way.” Mohsin’s voice weakened. Kashan stayed silent.

“How is Tazeen?”

“She is very happy in her life.”

“Tazeen never married?”

“No. She always loved me more than herself.”

“Do you still live in the same house?”

“Yes. My grandmother willed it to my mother. She has passed away now.”

Again, silence.

“I want us to stay in touch, Kashan. Blood relations never truly end.”

“Love isn’t built on blood or relations— it’s built on behaviour.”

The words struck Mohsin like a blade. Before he could respond, his mobile rang.

“I think my son has come to pick me up. I’ll take your leave.” He stood slowly.

“Keep my card—it has all my numbers. I’ll be waiting for your call.” Instead of taking it, Kashan pulled out his own card and held it out.

“Keep this one instead. Because I will never need you— but perhaps someday, you might need me.” Saying this, Kashan turned and walked away. Mohsin stood watching him, speechless.

✦✦✦

Nazli was hanging her clothes on hangers, sliding them neatly into the wardrobe, when she noticed Amir standing at the doorway. Her hands froze midair for two seconds. She did not know what to say. This was their first encounter since his return home. After speaking with Roshan Ara about Anita, Amir had stayed away for two days — and now, quietly, he had come back again. “Since I came home, I haven’t met you. So I thought I’d come myself,” Amir said, stepping inside.

“I also needed to talk to you. Please, sit,” Nazli replied calmly, resuming her work.

“You’ve become very busy. Ammi told me you even topped at the university,” Amir said, taking a seat on the chair nearby. “That’s old news now,” Nazli replied, hanging the last piece of clothing.

“I was thinking — I should start going to the shop again,” Amir said, watching her closely.

“That’s not possible, Amir bhai,” Nazli said firmly, shutting the wardrobe.

“Why not?” His surprise was genuine.

“Because that’s not the same shop you used to sit in. It’s Ameen’s shop now — the result of three years of his hard work. You sold Abba’s shop before leaving, remember?” Her voice carried no softness this time.

“I made a mistake… I just want to make amends,” Amir said, staring down at his palms.

“If you want to make amends, go apologize to your wife — and live with her again. Stop making new mistakes.”

“I didn’t leave her — they threw me out,” Amir said helplessly.

“When you kept doing what you did while living in their house, they had no choice but to do that.” Nazli’s words cut through him, calm but sharp.

“Anita lies. She’s suspicious. She accuses me falsely.” Amir shook his head bitterly.

“Amir bhai, even if she’s foolish or mad, she still doesn’t deserve what you did to her.” Nazli’s tone was heavy with controlled anger.

“You’re my sister, yet you’re taking her side?” he said incredulously.

“I’m taking the side of what’s right. Whether it’s you or her who’s wrong — that doesn’t matter to me.”

“What do you want me to do?” Amir’s voice broke into weariness.

“Go apologize to Anita Bhabhi — win her back. Never abandon your wife and child again.” Nazli’s tone softened; she could feel his defeat.

“This is my house too. You people can’t throw me out. I have a share in it.” Amir said emotionally. Nazli gave a strange, almost bitter smile.

“That’s the only thing you ever remember — inheritance shares! You sold one property before; if you want, we’ll give you your share of this one too. So stop talking about property rights.”

“I didn’t mean that. If you can help reconcile me and Anita, then…” Amir’s voice was low — almost pleading.

Nazli had never seen him this subdued before. Something in her softened. Despite all his wrongs, she could not bear to see him so broken.

“Please start going to the shop from tomorrow,” Nazli said after a moment’s thought.

A few days later, Nazli decided to visit Anita’s father’s house. Before leaving for the office, she drove there early in the morning. Parking her car, she rang the bell. After a moment, Fareeda opened the door.

“I’ve come to meet Anita Bhabhi — is she at home?” Nazli asked with a polite smile.

“Yes, she’s at home — where would she go?” Fareeda replied indifferently, stepping aside to let her in.

Though Fareeda was secretly relieved at Amir’s departure, she was deeply worried about the possibility of divorce — for that would mean Anita’s permanent return to her father’s home.

“How are you, Anita Bhabhi?” Nazli rose from her seat in the drawing room and embraced her as she entered. Anita’s face was pale and sad.

“I’m fine,” she said faintly. Nazli studied her for a few seconds before both sat down.

“Amir bhai had been calling you for many days, but you weren’t picking up.”

“What is there to get by talking now, Nazli?” Anita’s voice trembled with bitterness.

“Amir bhai truly regrets his actions,” Nazli said carefully, choosing her words.

“Regret is mine, Nazli. What did I gain by marrying him? Disgrace, insult, poverty — and whatever remained incomplete, his unfaithfulness completed.” Anita broke down crying.

“I understand your pain, Anita Bhabhi. Amir bhai did very wrong with you.”

“But perhaps girls like me — who fall in love at a young age — this is how their story ends. Life isn’t what we imagine from dramas and films.” Anita poured out the bitterness she had long suppressed.

“But Bhabhi, whatever it is, your son should be the most important now. Think about his future.”

“Thinking of that already drives me mad. Here, my stepmother keeps taunting me every day.” Anita began to cry again.

“Forgive Amir bhai. Give him one last chance,” Nazli said gently, her eyes imploring.

“In your opinion, Amir will change? Has he ever listened to anyone?” Anita said, wiping her tears.

“I see a lot of change in him. He’s working diligently at the shop. He even prays regularly now, just like Baba.” Anita remained silent, eyes distant.

“Even God forgives His servants, Bhabhi. You loved Amir bhai once. Now that he has truly realized his mistakes — forgive him. If not for yourself, then for your son.” Nazli placed her hand on Anita’s.

Tears glistened in Anita’s eyes. “I’m not happy living apart from Amir either. Baba keeps urging me to divorce him — but I don’t know what to do.” She began crying once more.

“Then come with me. I’ve come to take you home. Our house — and Amir bhai — will be complete again when you and Faris return.”

“But Baba will be furious. He’s forbidden me strictly.”

“Bhabhi, you’re still Amir bhai’s wife —\ and the mother of his child. Even when you first married, you didn’t listen to your father then, did you?” Nazli teased gently.

Both laughed through their tears.

“Bring your belongings — and yes, where’s Faris?”

“He’s sleeping. I’ll bring him. Shall I make you tea?”

“No, we’ll have it at home. You just get ready quickly.” Anita went to prepare. Truthfully, she too had never been happy apart from her husband. A woman’s heart for her husband is like a mother’s for her child — no matter his faults, in the end, he remains hers. In both loves, the feeling of motherhood always overpowers the anger. By Nazli’s effort, Anita’s and Amir’s hearts were joined again. The lesson life had meant to teach Amir, it had taught him — by humbling him, by making him weep. A deep respect for Nazli now took root in Amir’s heart. He often spoke with Roshan Ara about her marriage. But Roshan Ara had grown weary of asking Nazli that question. She wanted to marry Nazli before marrying Sharmeen, yet for Nazli, studies still came first. Roshan Ara, surrounded now by her grandson and a reformed son, found a renewed peace in her life. She saw great change in Amir — he was no longer careless or heedless. Faris had become the center of his world. Often, watching his son sleep, Amir would remember his own father and regret how he had never repaid Javaid’s quiet affection. He began walking his father’s path — of decency, of quiet dignity. Perhaps, Nazli thought, some failures are given by God only to correct us.

✦✦✦

Kashan had not mentioned his meeting with his father to Tazeen for many weeks. During that time, he lived quietly burdened by unease — but he did not let Tazeen sense even a trace of it. A few weeks later, he received a call from Mohsin, who insisted on meeting him again. Kashan, citing his professional commitments, spoke briefly and ended the call. That same evening, after much thought, he told Tazeen everything — from his encounter with Mohsin at the hospital to the last phone call he had received from him.

“What have you decided then?” Tazeen asked, releasing a slow sigh.

“About what?” Kashan’s tone held surprise.

“Whether you will meet your father again or not?” she asked quietly.

“If I had wanted to meet him, I would have met him,” Kashan replied flatly. Then he stood up and walked away. Tazeen knew how deeply this must have wounded him. For Kashan, Mohsin had never been a father — only a painful memory. And this was the very truth Mohsin had never understood. Perhaps it was remorse, or perhaps merely an old man’s late awareness, but one day Mohsin himself came to Tazeen’s house.

When the servant announced that Mr. Mohsin Ali had arrived, Tazeen felt as if the ground had slipped from beneath her feet. She had never wished to see that face

again. Yet, being Kashan's father, she composed herself and told the servant to seat him in the drawing room.

Kashan was not at home at that time. Mohsin said he wished to meet Tazeen. After a long pause, she gathered her strength and went inside. Mohsin rose slowly on seeing her. For a few moments, silence filled the room. Both stood before each other, unsure what to say. As bright and steady as Tazeen appeared, Mohsin looked equally frail and spent.

"Kashan is not at home right now. Perhaps the servant told you," she said at last.

"Yes, he did — but I thought, who knows when he'll return. There were a few things I wished to give him."

Mohsin avoided her gaze.

"Please sit down. He'll be home shortly." She gestured politely.

"What will you have — something cold, or coffee?" Her tone carried the restrained courtesy of a hostess.

"No, nothing. Actually, after meeting Kashan, life has thrown me back by many years. I've realized that I did nothing for my children."

Tazeen gave no reply.

"I've brought some shopping for him — and this cheque I wish to give him from myself. If you could please hand it to him..." With trembling hands, Mohsin placed two shopping bags on the sofa.

"Kashan will be home soon. It will be better if you give these to him yourself," Tazeen said coldly.

"You won't stop him, will you? He told me he does nothing without your consent."

"Why would I stop him? This is between father and son." Her tone was measured — devoid of warmth, devoid of anger.

"I'm glad you've raised him so well. You made him educated and capable," Mohsin said after a pause.

"This has always been the purpose of my life." For the first time, Tazeen felt a quiet pride bloom within her chest. To hear those words from Mohsin himself was strange satisfaction enough.

At that very moment, Kashan entered the drawing room. Seeing Tazeen and Mohsin sitting face to face, he stopped short, stunned.

“Come, son Kashan — I was waiting for you,” Tazeen said with a gentle smile.

“Kashan, my son!” Mohsin called warmly, his tone unfamiliar to Kashan’s ears.

“You didn’t come to meet me, son. I was waiting, so I came myself.” Mohsin’s voice carried a softness that belonged to neither past nor memory.

“Because of some engagements, I couldn’t come,” Kashan replied in a flat tone.

“I thought you might need money. Here — take this cheque, and these things too. I bought them for you.” Mohsin held the shopping bag toward him.

“For what reason?” Kashan asked quietly.

“For your expenses, son. Take it.” Kashan looked at him for a moment, then laughed — a strange, weary laugh. “You thought of this today? Now, when I earn my own living? These were thoughts meant for years ago.”

“I can’t correct the past,” Mohsin said helplessly.

“Now too much time has passed. Anyway, I was always used to taking money from my mother. Today I earn enough to give her instead. So keep your cheque.”

“Well, at least take these gifts. I brought them for you.”

“There’s no space in my house to keep them.” Kashan’s words were calm, but they carried an edge that cut deep. Tazeen looked at him silently. She had never seen him speak to Mohsin directly before.

“Kashan, son — I know there must be many things in your mind about me, some right, some wrong…” Mohsin began nervously.

“Which right and wrong things? No one ever filled my mind with anything about you — and Mama… never her. So whatever lives in my mind is only what I saw with my own eyes.” Kashan’s voice was low — but each word struck with surgical precision.

“I wish to fulfill some duty of being a father too,” Mohsin said faintly.

“Exactly. Because merely giving birth doesn’t make one a father. Only taking responsibility does.” Kashan’s tone was steady, merciless.

Mohsin rose slowly to his feet. “Tazeen, it seems you people have not yet forgiven me.”

“You never asked for forgiveness, Mr. Mohsin. Even today, you haven’t used the word.” Tazeen’s reply was gentle — but cold as marble.

Mohsin looked at both of them, eyes filled with remorse and exhaustion.

“There are some mistakes and sins in life for which no atonement can ever be made. I too have committed such failings — and today I stand as their living embodiment. But knowing that you are happy gives me peace. I will take your leave.” With eyes brimming with regret, Mohsin lifted the shopping bag and walked away.

Kashan and Tazeen stood watching him go. The door closed behind him. And then Tazeen — who had held herself together all this time — sank into Kashan’s arms and burst into tears. For the first time, Kashan too wept openly before her.

✦✦✦

After her final-year master’s examinations, Nazli became busier than ever. A grand fashion show in Dubai was approaching — the biggest event her boutique had yet to attend — and Nazli had taken on every responsibility herself. Meetings with models and organizers, designing dresses, supervising their stitching, and managing daily office work — her days had turned into a restless whirlwind. That afternoon, after a meeting at a luxury mall, she was walking swiftly toward her car in the parking lot when someone called her name. She didn’t hear the first time.

Then, again, the same voice —

“Nazli!”

She froze.

Her heart jolted violently.

That voice — it was too familiar. The echo of it had haunted her imagination for years. Even now, it carried the same spell that once could still her every step.

She turned slowly. And there he was.

Zain.

Time had barely touched him. Dressed in a black shirt, jacket, and denim jeans, his fair skin glowed under the evening lights. He looked exactly as he had the last time she’d seen him. To Nazli, it felt as if the clock of years had stopped ticking.

“To see you again is such a pleasant surprise, yaar.” Zain smiled as he walked closer.

Nazli's palms grew damp with sweat. She felt a sudden rush of breathlessness. Never had she imagined meeting Zain again — like this.

"How are you?" The words left her lips with effort.

"I'm perfectly fine. But you—you've changed beyond measure. In fact, even more than that." Zain's eyes moved slowly from head to toe.

"Yes, much time has passed. Much has changed. And you — how's life?"

"Going well. You've become even more beautiful than before." He smiled — the same charming smile.

Nazli didn't like the compliment. She stayed silent, unsure how to react.

"Well, let's go somewhere and sit — have some coffee." He spoke casually, as if nothing had ever happened.

"No, I'm busy right now. I have to reach a meeting," she said, glancing at her watch.

"Where's your meeting?"

"At the Marriott," she replied simply.

Zain looked mildly impressed. "Oh, I see. Mama told me you were working as administrator in her friend Tazeen's boutique."

"That's an old story now. I'm now head of production — and lead fashion designer." Nazli corrected him calmly.

"Oh! I didn't know. Though Mama did say Tazeen Auntie's boutique has gained fame even abroad." He looked genuinely intrigued.

"Yes, you could say that," Nazli said, taking her car keys from her handbag.

For Zain, her coldness was unbearable.

"Nazli! You won't ask me anything about myself?"

"I don't have time right now." She took two steps toward her car.

"All right then, we'll meet again."

"I don't think so," Nazli replied in a flat voice.

"Nazli, I've never married — because of you. After leaving you, I realized my mistake. When I spent four months in Bangkok jail, I understood how badly I treated you." The words tumbled from his mouth rapidly.

Nazli stared at him, stunned. To hear Zain speak of mistake and regret was like listening to a stranger wearing his face.

“Believe me, whatever time we spent together — I have never been able to forget it,” he said softly.

“Too much time has passed, Zain. That chapter of my life is closed. Please let me go — I’m getting late.”

“Just once, Nazli. Please meet me again,” he pleaded.

“I don’t think we can meet again.” Her voice was firm. Then she turned, and walked quickly to her car. Zain stood watching as she drove away, his reflection vanishing in the polished glass.

After completing his sentence in Bangkok, Zain returned to Pakistan. Despite all of Huma and Afzal’s efforts, he refused to go to any mental-rehabilitation centre. Afzal’s family doctor had insisted that such treatment was essential to erase the trauma of imprisonment— but Zain, withdrawn and unpredictable, would not agree. His routine changed entirely. Despite Huma’s constant persuasion, he showed no interest in an arranged engagement. He seemed perpetually afraid— of Afzal’s temper, of Huma’s disappointment, of his own hollow future. With great difficulty, over a year and a half, he completed the remaining subjects of his A-Levels. On Huma’s persistent insistence, Afzal reluctantly agreed to send him to his stepsister, Aiza, in England. Huma placed upon Aiza the responsibility of securing Zain’s admission into some university on self-finance. For that, she spent several lakhs of rupees— her faith in her son’s abilities blind but unbroken. Zain’s admission was finally arranged in an obscure English university for graduation. To him, this admission felt like deliverance— a doorway out of Pakistan’s colourless life and the suffocating restrictions of his parents. Once in England, Zain lived briefly with Aiza. But within a few months, he insisted on renting his own apartment— and from there began the quiet ruin of his studies. Afzal had opposed this plan from the start. He had warned Huma again and again:

“Zain won’t change, not even abroad.” But she had refused to believe it.

Three years later, Zain somehow managed to scrape through, obtaining a bachelor’s degree of little worth. By his own will, he got engaged to a white Christian girl. When Huma learned of it, it was as though lightning had struck her. For four months, the engagement lingered— and then, without announcement, it broke. As an act of gratitude to fate, Huma donated lakhs in charity to an orphanage. Five years of his life

had thus slipped by: a prison sentence in Bangkok, a failed education abroad, a squandered fortune, a broken engagement. In those same five years, Nazli had lifted herself and her family from hardship, turning misfortune into quiet strength. The years that had refined her had only undone him. There was no real change in Zain's nature. He still flirted, still gathered girlfriends like souvenirs of his vanity. Huma, worn by worry, was still searching for a "respectable" match for him. After his chance meeting with Nazli, something in Zain stirred again. Her indifference unsettled him. Her poise, her success, her calm rejection— all struck at his pride. He wanted to see her again. Nazli had not given him her number. But within a few days, with the help of one of his girlfriends, he obtained her contact from her office.

Nazli, on her end, could not forget that encounter either. Zain's words kept echoing in her mind. He began calling her phone incessantly. Nazli never answered. The number was unknown, yet she instinctively knew it was him. After many ignored calls, Zain resorted to his old impulsive habits. He parked his car outside her office one evening, waiting near the lot as the day ended. When Nazli appeared, she saw him at once— and was not surprised. Zain was perfectly capable of such recklessness.

"Since yesterday I've called you so many times, Nazli, and you didn't receive even once," he complained, walking toward her.

"I don't receive calls from unknown numbers," Nazli said coldly.

"If you had answered, you would have known the number wasn't unknown," Zain replied with a smile.

For a moment, Nazli's memory flashed back to that day years ago— the restaurant where she had stood before him in tears, pleading, heartbroken.

"Zain, for so many days I've been trying to contact you. Your phone keeps going off." Her own past words echoed in her ears.

"Nazli?" Zain's voice brought her back. "Where are you lost? You weren't like this."

"Zain, whatever you want to say, say it," Nazli said firmly.

"Nazli, I know I did wrong by you. But believe me, I did what I thought was best for both of us. Only out of shame could I never apologize."

"It's all right," Nazli said, eyes averted.

"Nazli, seeing you after so many years, I realized I still love you— and surely you must feel the same." She looked at him silently.

“Nazli, please—can we sit somewhere and talk? Please! If you ever loved me truly, even for a single day, then don’t refuse me now.” Nazli stayed quiet.

“Remember,” Zain continued, “when I couldn’t talk to you before sleeping, you wouldn’t sleep all night— you’d be angry, cry, remember?”

“Everything I remember,” Nazli said softly.

“Then I’d apologize, and your anger would melt away instantly.” Zain smiled faintly.

“Yes, that’s how it used to be,” Nazli said bitterly.

“Just give me one chance, Nazli. I truly want to apologize. I want to tell you how much space you hold in my heart.” Nazli was silent for a long moment. Then she said,

“When do you want to meet?”

A sudden gleam appeared in her eyes.

“This weekend,”

Zain said quickly.

“All right.

Then book a dinner table at any five-star hotel.”

“Don’t worry— I’m so restless to see you again,” Zain said earnestly.

“And I, perhaps even more,” Nazli replied, meeting his gaze.

“I know. You’ve always loved me more.” Zain smiled charmingly.

“Well, I’m going now. We’ll meet on the weekend.” Nazli turned and left. Zain stood there, smiling, watching her walk away.

“Mama, I have something to tell you,” Zain said, entering Huma’s bedroom.

Huma was adjusting her jewellery before the mirror.

“Yes? What is it?” she asked without looking up.

“Mama, I met Nazli today.”

“Oh? And then?” Huma slipped bracelets onto her wrists.

“She’s changed completely— so confident, so successful. She’s done an MBA from a top university. I’m truly impressed.” Zain picked an apple from the fruit basket and took a bite.

“Yes, Tazeen told me she’s managing her entire business now. Tazeen trusts her immensely.” Huma was now fixing her makeup.

“You’re busy looking for matches for me, but I’m thinking of approaching Nazli again.”

“After all you did to her, do you think she’ll agree?” Huma asked, glancing at him through the mirror.

“Yes, of course. Why wouldn’t she? She still seemed emotional— ready to respond at the slightest signal. If I ask, she’ll come.” Zain laughed lightly.

“Well, the idea isn’t bad. She won’t object even to your broken engagement. If she agrees, it’ll be good. Her career is excellent—she suits you now.” Huma considered.

“Besides, you already know her family. They’ll agree easily.”

“Obviously. With their background, they can’t say no. And frankly, I’m tired of looking for matches in our own class. People’s standards are absurd these days. Your Bangkok matter has spread everywhere.”

“For Nazli, that won’t matter. Just make Dad agree.”

“Afzal won’t mind. Whenever we’ve discussed her, he’s spoken well of her.”

“Then there’s no problem at all.” Zain grinned.

“You talk to her. Actually, Tazeen called me today—she’s visiting soon. I’ll tell her to nudge Nazli a little in your favour.”

“No, Mama. I don’t want her under anyone’s pressure. I want her through my love.”

Huma smiled faintly. “Well, I’m going now. I have a dinner.” She picked up her purse and left.

Zain waited for the weekend— restless, confident, triumphant.

✦✦✦

Nazli stood before her mirror, applying makeup with quiet precision, when her sister Sharmeen entered.

“Going to someone’s wedding?” Sharmeen teased.

Nazli smiled faintly. “Does it look like that?”

“Yes — because you never dress up like this otherwise.” Sharmeen studied her.

“Think of it as a special occasion— one I’ve been waiting for. Didn’t think it would come so soon,” Nazli said with a strange smile.

“What’s so special? By the way, this red dress looks stunning on you.”

“It’s nothing. Just think of it as my day of victory,” Nazli replied enigmatically.

“And yes— this dress isn’t red; it’s scarlet. Scarlet, the colour of blood— you know that, don’t you?”

“What do you mean?” Sharmeen frowned.

“Nothing. You wouldn’t understand.” Nazli touched her sister’s cheek affectionately and turned away. After Sharmeen left,

Nazli opened a drawer in her wardrobe. From its farthest corner, she took out a small ring box. It was the same box in which Zain had once placed a ring and proposed to her during college. She opened it. The gold plating had long faded. In her ears echoed the laughter of her friends—

“This doesn’t look like gold at all, Nazli.”

“Even if it’s brass,” she had replied proudly,

“for me, it’s a diamond.”

Now, years later, she clenched the ring tightly in her palm— and left the room.

✦✦✦

Nazli arrived at the five-star hotel where Zain had reserved a table. He was already seated when she entered, and as she began walking toward him, Zain rose to his feet at once. Her serene confidence, her beauty, the quiet dignity in her step— it all left him momentarily breathless. She looked extraordinary. A warm smile spread across his face.

“These flowers are for you,” he said, picking up the bouquet from the table and extending it toward her. Nazli looked at the bouquet for a moment, then asked,

“They’re real flowers, aren’t they?” Her tone was calm but oddly pointed.

“Of course—why?” Zain frowned slightly, not understanding.

“No, nothing. I just thought perhaps you’d bring some cheap bouquet of artificial flowers.” Nazli smiled faintly, the sarcasm veiled but unmistakable.

“I was bringing them for you—why would I bring artificial ones?” Zain said, trying to laugh it off.

Without replying, Nazli sat down gracefully. Zain followed, taking the seat opposite her.

“You look very beautiful—as always,” Zain said, gazing at her with the old familiar admiration.

“And foolish? Don’t I look that way too—as always?” Nazli asked, her smile faint and ironic.

“No, I never thought you were foolish,” he replied quickly, regaining his composure.

“Yes, but you did make me one,” Nazli said with a short, bitter laugh.

“Oh, come on—what are you saying?” Zain looked slightly embarrassed.

“Why? You used to say I was foolish because I lived in a world of dreams—remember?” Nazli widened her eyes, deliberately reminding him.

“I may have said that once, but I don’t remember now,” Zain said, shifting uneasily in his chair.

“Let’s do one thing—today we’ll talk only about those memories you do remember.” Nazli rested her arms on the table, calm and composed.

“I remember everything, Nazli—our first meeting, our first phone call, my waiting outside your college, our first date—every single word of yours,” Zain said, growing emotional, his tone heavy with nostalgia.

“Really?” Nazli asked softly, her brows slightly raised.

“Yes, believe me. Even our late-night phone calls, that Valentine’s Day we spent together—everything. Even when you bunked classes to meet me and…”

Nazli cut him off before he could continue.

“And the breakup? You don’t remember that?”

Zain fell silent.

“Of course—why not? I remember that too. How could I forget? But you always remembered things more vividly than I did,” he said, attempting a faint smile.

“Zain, what I remember is only one thing—our breakup. Because it taught me lessons that I could never have learned while being with you.” Her voice was quiet but resolute.

Zain said nothing.

“I know you were deeply hurt then, that’s why today I called you here— so I can fold my hands and ask your forgiveness. Please forgive me, please.” Zain actually joined his hands in front of her.

Nazli looked at him in astonishment. “In all these years, did you ever once think of apologizing to me?”

Zain said nothing.

“No, right? Then why this thought now?” Nazli asked calmly, her voice like steel wrapped in silk.

“Because after meeting you, I realized that I still love you—”

“Shut up, Zain!” Nazli’s sudden interruption cut like a whip. Her eyes flared with cold fire.

“The girl sitting before you isn’t the eighteen-year-old Nazli whom you trapped with your smooth talk and fake affection. At least today, I want to hear only truth from you.”

“I’m telling the truth, Nazli—believe me. I really still love you, and I’m ashamed,” Zain said earnestly.

Nazli burst out laughing— a sharp, almost painful laugh that startled him.

“What happened? Why are you laughing?” Zain asked, confused.

“Zain, if I don’t laugh, what else should I do? Do you remember what you told me the last time I came to you crying— begging you not to leave me?”

“What?” Zain asked quietly.

“You said: *‘Nazli, you’re just a good friend of mine, nothing more. There’s never been anything between us.’* Remember those words?”

Zain sat frozen, his mouth slightly open.

“And yes— you also said I should clear my mind, because there was never any relationship between us. Do you recall that too?”

Zain remained silent.

“Now, after all these years, you come to me and say you still love me. Tell me, Zain— should I laugh at such words, or cry?” Nazli’s tone dripped with restrained fury.

“Nazli, I broke up only because my family would never have agreed. I didn’t want to bind us in a hopeless relationship. I thought it better for both of us.”

“You’re lying, Zain! That your family objected, I might accept— but that you ever truly loved me, that I’ll never believe.” Nazli’s words were sharp, deliberate.

“How can I make you believe me?” he asked helplessly.

“Believe? Did you believe me when I cried, when I begged? You didn’t then, so why should I now?”

Zain lowered his eyes, speechless. Nazli reached into her purse, took out the small ring box, and placed it before him.

“Remember this ring? You gave it to me once, so proudly. Everyone said it wasn’t real gold— but I never believed them.” Her eyes glistened.

“Nazli…” Zain whispered, looking at it.

“You changed your colour in a single day, Zain. This ring at least took months to fade— slowly, quietly—just like your hollow love.” She fell silent.

The waiter came, placed the menu, and withdrew.

“And I— I was the one who sold my real gold ring, the one my father bought with his hard-earned money, just to buy the perfume you liked.” Her voice trembled, but her eyes didn’t. Tears slipped down her cheeks. Zain still could not look up.

“I couldn’t understand then that my father’s selfless love was far more precious than your false promises.” She stopped speaking for a while.

“I can only say that knowingly or unknowingly I wronged you, and now I have no way left except to ask forgiveness.” Zain’s voice was small, uncertain.

“More than you, I wronged myself, Zain— in trying to fill my emptiness with something forbidden and false. And the result is here before us.”

Her voice was calm again, almost compassionate.

“If I marry you today, will you then believe that I truly love you?” Zain asked suddenly— his last desperate attempt.

Nazli looked straight into his eyes. “If I tell you I’ll burn my degrees and leave my career to marry you, will you still say these same words?”

He hesitated. Then said, “Even then I’d marry you— and this time, I’m not lying.”

Nazli smiled faintly. “But I still can’t marry you, Zain.” He stared at her, stunned.

“Maybe if our breakup hadn’t happened, you would never have misunderstood me so.”

“I’m glad it did,” Nazli said quietly.

“It taught me that love for a human must never exceed love for God. Because when it does, He tears that idol down. I worshiped you once, Zain. But God showed me your reality— and through that pain, He taught me His own love.”

Her words carried years of silent endurance and divine awakening.

“Zain, I’ve realized no one can love us more than God does. He gives, He takes, but always for the best. We only need patience.”

Zain was silent, hollowed out.

“I want to make amends by marrying you, Nazli. Believe me.”

Nazli smiled gently. “Zain, I’m already engaged. My wedding is next month.”

The words struck him like a blow. He stared, disbelieving.

Nazli raised her hand slightly— on her finger gleamed a diamond ring.

“You know, the man who placed this ring on my finger has never even touched my hand. Unlike you, he never tried to take me to an apartment on the first day.” Her gaze was steady, almost pitying.

Zain swallowed hard. “May I know who he is?”

“He’s coming right now,” Nazli replied serenely.

“You’ll receive our wedding card from my future husband himself.” She glanced toward the entrance. Zain followed her eyes— and paralysed as he saw Kashan walking toward them. Nazli rose from her seat as Kashan arrived. He smiled warmly at her.

“I’m not late, am I? You look lovely,” Kashan said affectionately.

“Not at all. I was waiting for you,” Nazli replied, her voice light, her smile radiant.

“Hello, Zain!” Kashan said, extending his hand. Zain shook it numbly.

“Zain, this is my fiancé Kashan. Kashan, this is Zain— once a good friend of mine. We met again recently.”

“Ah, Nazli has mentioned you before. Glad to meet you,” Kashan said warmly.

Zain’s eyes remained fixed on Nazli, but she met his gaze with serene calm.

“Kashan, I told you to bring one of our wedding cards— I wanted to give it to Zain myself.”

“Oh yes, I did bring it.” Kashan pulled a card from his coat pocket and handed it to Zain.

“Here—our wedding’s next month. You must come.”

Zain took the card mechanically, his fingers trembling. No one spoke for a few seconds.

“Shall we go, Nazli?” Kashan asked softly.

“Yes, let’s.” Nazli turned to Zain with a composed smile. “It would make us very happy if you come to the wedding.” Zain said nothing.

“Please do come. We’ll meet there,” Kashan added courteously, extending his hand again. Zain shook it wordlessly.

Kashan and Nazli turned and walked away together, their silhouettes reflecting gracefully in the marble floor. They looked peaceful—complete. Zain stood rooted where he was, watching them go. After a moment, he looked down at the table. There lay the bouquet Nazli had dismissed, the fake-gold ring she had returned, and the wedding card with their names gleaming side by side. Everything seemed to mock him— his vanity, his delusion, his past. Zain set the wedding card down between the ring and the bouquet, took one long, unsteady breath, and walked slowly out of the hotel. The glass doors closed behind him. And with them, closed forever the last chapter of his illusion.

✦✦✦✦✦ THE END ✦✦✦✦✦